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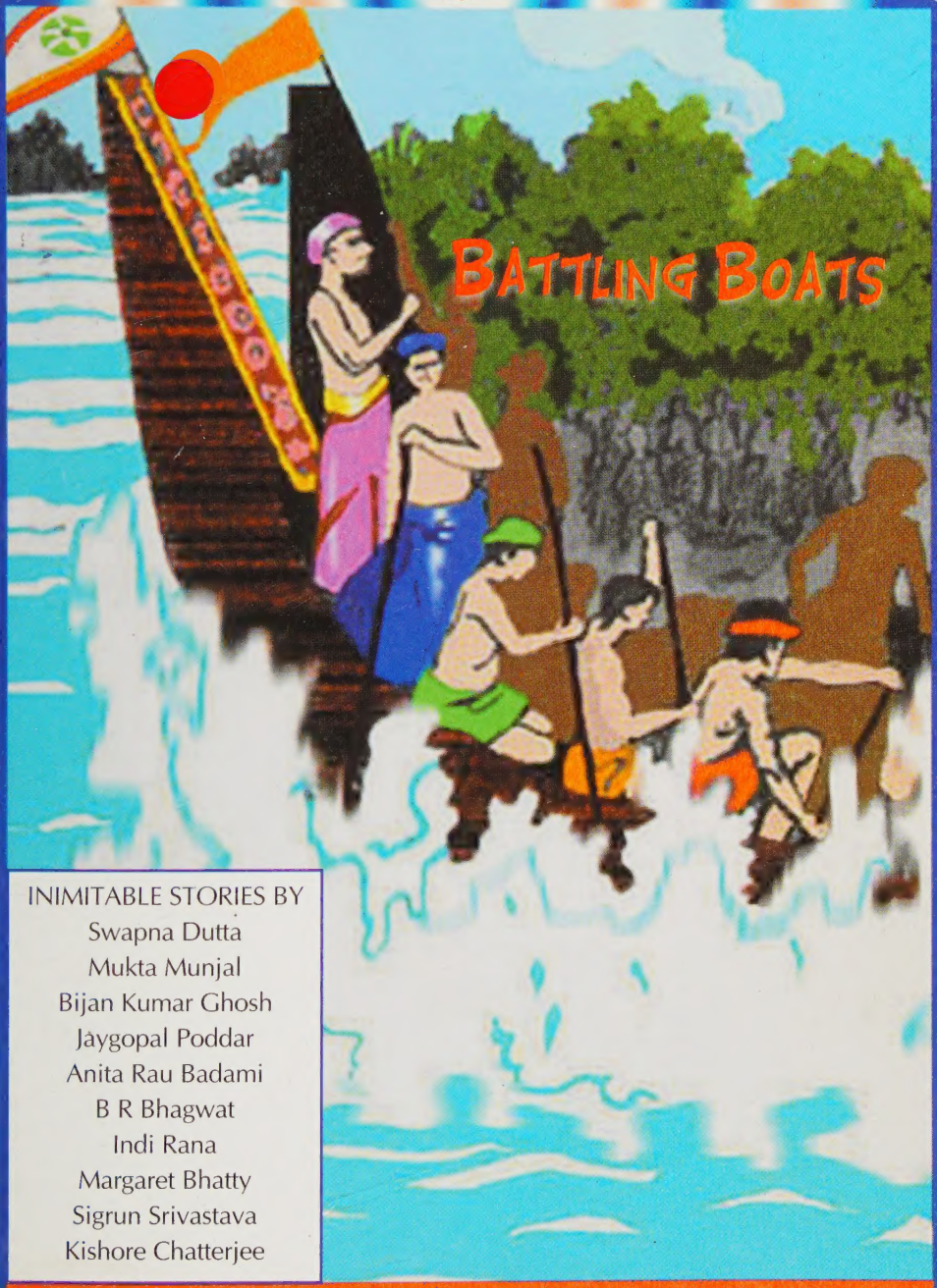

BATTLING BOATS

INIMITABLE STORIES BY
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Bijan Kumar Ghosh
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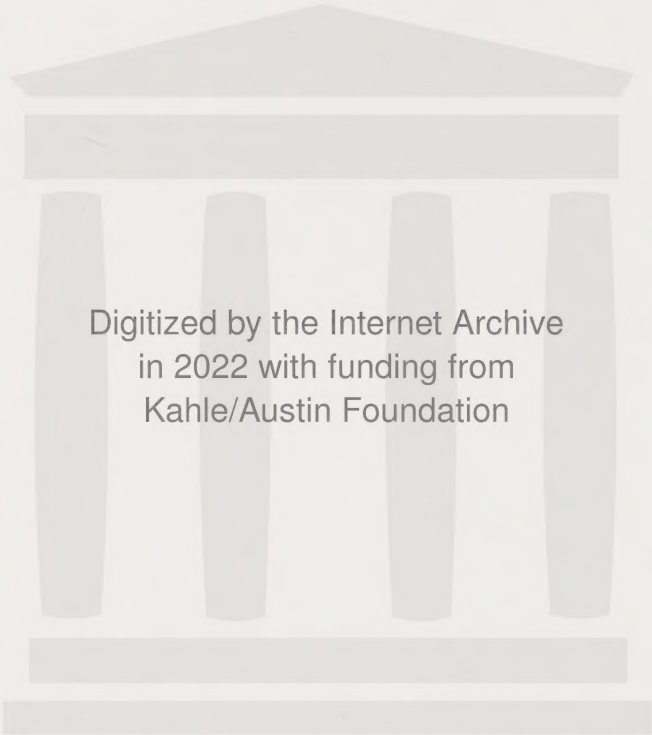
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BATTLING BOATS

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from stories published in *Target* magazine

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A Dog Named Vicky

SWAPNA DUTTA

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Chumki had not really planned to keep a dog. Not because she did not love them. But because dogs have such a short life. Before you know where you are, the cuddlesome pup turns into a full-fledged dog and by the time he becomes as much a part of the family as anyone else, it's time to say goodbye! Having faced it once, Chumki did not want to go through it all over again. And her parents agreed. But some things in life happen unexpectedly. Vicky's coming was one of them.

One evening Chumki was playing in the garden with her sister when a chubby, cream and black alsatian dashed in. "Look!" cried Bobo, Chumki's little sister. "Where has he come from?"

"Oh, what a darling!" cried Chumki, petting him. "I wonder who he belongs to?" The dog licked both the sisters and then made a dash for the ball.

"He wants to play with us," said Bobo. "Don't you remember, this is exactly what our Jimmy used to do?" Chumki's eyes grew moist. Jim had been her special pet and she still missed him badly. She picked up the red ball

and threw it to the dog. He leaped up and caught it, his tail wagging nineteen to the dozen.

"Vicky! Vicky!" shouted a man's voice from the other end of the road. The dog pricked up his ears, dropped the ball and ran out of the gate.

"I wish I knew who he belonged to," said Chumki wistfully. "He's such a cute fellow. Wouldn't it be lovely if we could play with him sometimes?"

"I don't suppose the owner would let him play with strangers," said Bobo. "I wonder how he managed to come at all."

But Vicky came again. And again! He dashed in, eager and confident of being welcome, his tail thumping vigorously as he licked everyone by turn and settled down in a corner. He was so very winsome that everyone loved him from the word go. Chumki's mother tried to resist but failed miserably when she saw the love in his eyes and the mute appeal which seemed to say "Don't send me away!" He belonged to someone else but he wanted to stay here! It was a hopeless tangle!

Gradually, his periods of stay grew longer and longer. Chumki's mother did not allow the children to feed him. It was not right to feed someone else's pet without permission, she told them firmly. But Vicky did not come for food.

He always came in around mid-morning, pushing the door open with his nose. He knocked with his paws when the door was locked. He sat on the steps patiently when the family was out. The children were never home when Vicky came, but he ambled in and lay on the carpet, waiting patiently for Chumki and Bobo to return from school. He

stayed on until their father returned home from the office and the whole family had a game of ball in the garden. Then they would insist on his going back home. "Home! Vicky, HOME! GO, GO!" they would call out in a chorus. Vicky never failed to give them a reproachful look as he went out slowly, his tail tucked between his legs, looking the picture of misery. Chumki felt as miserable as he did. But there was nothing she could do! She could not keep someone else's pet! That would be stealing.

"Why don't you keep him altogether?" said Mrs Arora, their neighbour. "The owner would neither know nor care!"

"Do you know the owner?" asked Chumki's mother in surprise.

"Of course!" said Mrs Mishra, another neighbour.

"Well, I don't!" said Chumki's mother.

"That's because you're new to the place," said Mrs Arora. "Mrs Vohra owns Vicky. She's a great socialite. Always holding parties, organizing sales, exhibitions and things. She had no time for dogs!"

"Then why keep a dog at all?" asked Chumki's mother indignantly.

"She didn't," said Mrs Mishra. "It was her son who brought Vicky as a week old pup. He loved him all right. But two years later he suddenly got a scholarship to go abroad. Vicky misses him badly. I suppose that's why he keeps going to your place. There's no one to love him now."

Chumki's parents met Mrs Vohra – most unexpectedly – the very next day at a common friend's place. "Your dog Vicky comes to our place quite often," said Chumki's mother.

"Does he?" asked Mrs Vohra. "If he is a nuisance, I'll send someone over to fetch him."

"He is never a nuisance," cried Chumki's mother. "Why, let's ..." But Mrs Vohra was not interested. She merely handed her a card and turned away.

The next day Vicky absolutely refused to go back in the evening, in spite of commands and coaxing. He just sat on the steps, looking up miserably. "Oh, let him stay, Mummy," cried Chumki and Bobo together. But their mother remembered Mrs Vohra's card and went to ring her up. In a few minutes her car stood before their gate. The driver whistled. Vicky jumped up and got into the car.

He was back again the next morning. Chumki and Bobo, who were afraid that he wouldn't be allowed to come again, gave him an ecstatic welcome. He looked hungry so Chumki brought him a large bowl of milk and Bobo fetched some slices of bread. For once their mother looked the other way! Vicky lapped up everything and lay down on the carpet with a contented yawn.

He refused to go that evening, too. Mrs Vohra was not at home so no one picked up the phone. "Let him stay, Mummy," pleaded Chumki. But her mother would not agree. She shut the door firmly hoping Vicky would go away. But he didn't. He sat on the steps all night until Mrs Vohra's driver saw him there next morning and took him home. But Vicky stopped coming after that.

A whole week passed by. Chumki went about with red eyes and Bobo with a swollen nose. Their father had a king-sized headache that refused to go, while their mother snapped at everyone for no apparent reason.

The next piece of news which came their way was that Mrs Vohra was going abroad to her son. She would let the house and pack off everything to her other son living in Bombay. Everything included Vicky, of course.

It was a full fortnight since they had seen Vicky. It looked as though they would never see him again. Chumki was wrestling with decimals when she suddenly pricked up her ears. Mrs Arora was in the next room, talking to her mother. "The Vohras are leaving this afternoon," she said, "I saw their truck being loaded. It's just about to leave." Bobo jumped up, throwing away her painting book, "Let's go and say goodbye to Vicky."

"I don't want to. I have a headache," said Chumki and went off to the bedroom and switched off the light. She did not want anyone else to see her tears. Bobo went out. An hour passed. Or was it two hours?

Suddenly Chumki sat up. She heard the unmistakable sound of padded paws. In a moment Vicky dashed into the room. He was scratched in many places and was bleeding. But Chumki threw her arms around him, laughing and crying at the same time. "How did he get away?" asked Bobo running into the room. "Did the Vohras throw him out or did he jump out of the truck?"

Nobody ever knew. Or cared! Vicky was back. And that was all that mattered!

---

10 This story was first published in *Target* in December 1984.

BATTLING BOATS

MUKTA MUNJAL

Illustrated by Tapas Guha

That's the last fish sold! Come on, Sukumaran, let's go,"said Kuttan, picking up his half-empty basket.

"But there are a dozen coconuts left," protested Sukumaran.

"I don't care!" replied Kuttan. "Today I won't sit here till the last coconut is sold. I'm too excited!"

Sukumaran looked at his friend a little enviously. "How lucky you are to be rowing in the boat race tomorrow. Imagine! You'll be famous! The youngest ..."

Kuttan was already stepping into his dugout canoe which was strung together with coir ropes. The two boys paddled away from the marketplace, where the fisher-women in gaily coloured sarees balanced fish baskets on their heads as they shouted out the prices of dried and fresh water fish, coconuts and sea fish. Barefoot children were frolicking on swings tied between tall, swaying palms.

"The backwaters are so crowded today!" exclaimed Sukumaran. "Everyone's come for the races."

Then the crowds began to thin out. They passed an

occasional muscular fisherman, hanging on precariously to his catamaran.

"Which boat do you think will win tomorrow?" shouted Sukumaran, turning his head back to where Kuttan sat in the rear of the boat. "Karichal I or Karichal II?"

"Karichal I will win the trophy," Kuttan replied confidently.

"Is it true, Kuttan? The whole village is saying that Karoor Nilakantha Pillai is going to sell one of his two boats?" Sukumaran asked.

"Yes, it's true." Kuttan sighed. "He can't afford to keep both the Karichals any more. So he said that whichever one loses in the race tomorrow will be sold."

"But your father is a wonderful captain of Karichal I!" protested Sukumaran, quite agitated.

"Yes, but so is Kesavan's father, who is the captain of Karichal II," Kuttan replied.

They turned into a side canal where there was no traffic on the waters at all. Along the banks the village women were washing kitchen utensils and children were swimming and splashing in the water. The banks were a riot of colourful flowers. The boys turned into another canal and the scenery changed. First they passed a virgin forest, then a rice field, now a banana plantation and a coconut grove. A toddy tapper was sliding down a tree with his matka filled with toddy slung behind him.

The sun was setting on the backwaters. The clouds began to change from white to saffron, then a fiery red, then pink. Slowly it became shadowy on the canal.

Sukumaran looked around apprehensively. "I haven't been here before. We won't get lost, will we? I think it's time we got back."

"Don't worry. I know this canal very well," replied Kuttan. The dugout turned a corner, and Sukumaran gave a gasp of awe. In the fading twilight they could see the two boats standing side-by-side at the bank. A motorboat floated a little distance away.

"There they are! Karichal I and Karichal II," Kuttan announced proudly. "I helped Achhan to decorate Karichal I for tomorrow."

"They look identical, don't they?" Sukumaran observed.

"Yes, except for the I and II," Kuttan said.

The boys sat silent for a moment, in the shadows of the bank.

The two boats were a beautiful sight. They were gaily decorated with multicoloured silk parasols and gold tassels. Sukumaran looked at the colourful spirals carved on the bows and sterns of the two churulans with awe and admiration. He was opening his mouth to ask another question, when they suddenly heard a loud hammering.

The boys froze, hardly daring to breathe.

The hammering was coming from Karichal I! "Who is it?" whispered Sukumaran.

"Shh ... let's wait and see," Kuttan mouthed the words. Suddenly two figures stood up in the churulan. They looked around cautiously, then picking up their lungis they leapt onto the bank. The cloth fell from their lantern. Picking it up, they sprinted away into the darkness.

The two friends Sukumaran and Kuttan stared at one another in amazement.

"It's Kesavan! And his brother!" Kuttan gasped.

"What were they up to?" Sukumaran asked.

"I think I know exactly what they were doing. Come on, let's go and see." Kuttan paddled grimly up to the boat.

They climbed onto Karichal I. Kuttan bent low and examined the sides of the boat. Straightening up after a while, he told Sukumaran, "It's exactly as I had thought. Kesavan has made lots of holes at the bottom of both sides of the boat. He's stuffed them with cork, so that no one will see till it's too late."

"Why has he done that?" Sukumaran asked, also bending to examine the holes.

"So that no one will realize that anything is wrong till it is too late," replied Kuttan.

"What do you mean?"

"The sides have been cleverly greased, so these corks will start popping open when the boat goes very fast. By then we'll be in the middle of the lake."

"What can we do?" whispered Sukumaran, frightened.

"Let's go home. We'll decide what to do after I tell Achhan."

The two boys paddled silently home to the coconut grove where they lived.

Even though they had discovered the sabotage, was there time to repair the damaged boat before the morning race?

Amma was cooking rice and tapioca stew on a low fire outside their hut.

"Look, Kuttan! I've got you a new white dhoti for tomorrow," she greeted him.

"Where is Achhan, Amma?" he asked.

"Your father had to go meet Karoor Nilakantha Pillai. He won't be back till the morning, just before the races start," she informed him.

After their evening meal was over, the boys sat swinging on a sheet slung between two coconut trees. They were silent for a while. Vasu, Kuttan's younger brother, sat nearby on the rough grass. In urgent whispers, keeping a wary eye on Amma, Kuttan told him what they had discovered on Achhan's boat.

"Oh! That horrible Kesavan!" Vasu exclaimed.

"Shhh ... speak softly," Kuttan frowned. "We don't want to upset Amma."

Vasu frowned fiercely and uprooted a few chunks of grass in anger and frustration.

As Amma went in, Kuttan suddenly jumped off the swing, tumbling Sukumaran onto the ground. "I've thought of a plan! It will work ... I'm sure it will! Come on ... hurry! Let's go." Excitedly he yanked his friend up by the hand.

Rubbing his shoulder where it had banged on the hard ground Sukumaran scowled, "It had better be good ..."

"Listen ... this is my idea ..."

Kuttan spoke excitedly, the words tumbling out fast.

Twenty minutes later the three boys set off at a fast pace. Vasu held aloft the bottle of glow-worms that was their lamp to show them the path through the thick jungle of undergrowth and trees.

Reaching the place where the churulans were moored, Kuttan turned to his brother. "Vasu, you climb that coconut tree and keep a sharp look-out. Whistle once if you see anyone coming here from any direction," he ordered.

"Watch out for Kesavan and Unni. They might come back to do more damage," Sukumaran said.

"But I also want to help you on the boats," Vasu protested.

"This is the best way you can help us," Kuttan said.

"Oh, all right." With the agility of a monkey, Vasu climbed the tree in seconds. Perching precariously at the top he called out, "I can see very well from here."

"Shh ... not so loud," Kuttan gesticulated.

Kuttan and Sukumaran leapt onto the first boat with their heavy bag of tools. "I don't think Kesavan will come back," said Kuttan. "He must be happily dreaming of winning tomorrow."

They set to work silently and earnestly in the dim light of the glow-worm lamp. The night was dark and still around them. Suddenly, the silence was broken by a short, sharp whistle. Kuttan pushed the tools together hastily, and fell flat on the bottom of the boat. Sukumaran lay beside him, hardly daring to breathe.

"Shh ... I can hear someone coming," Sukumaran whispered. They lay still at the sound of the rustling of the undergrowth.

"Oh ... the lamp!" gasped Sukumaran. "It's lying on the ledge. I forgot about it."

Kuttan had no choice. He leapt up, grabbed the lamp of glow-worms, and covered it with the black cloth.

"I distinctly saw a light on that boat." A loud voice broke the stillness.

"Well, it's not there now. You must have imagined it. Come on, let's go and get some sleep."

Kuttan recognized the voices of two of Kesavan's big, burly cousins who would be taking part in the races tomorrow.

Suddenly they heard a loud yell. "Ouch! A coconut's hit me! Oh, my head!'

"Come on, I'm getting out of here." The boys heard the men beating a hasty retreat.

"Must have been that crazy Vasu," muttered Kuttan. They waited long minutes till the men were far away.

"Come on," said Kuttan at last, "There's more work to be done."

The boys slipped into the water and swam to the motorboat.

"Now for the last part ..." Kuttan said, as he started the engine. "It'll make some noise, but this is a risk we have to take."

Half an hour later they stood on the bank, surveying their work with great satisfaction. Vasu shinnied down the tree. "Well done!" he hugged his brother. The three boys grinned, and then turned home silently.

Kuttan was up early the next morning, just as the crowds started streaming into the canal-threaded town of Alleppey. Thousands and thousands of festive people poured in, the men in white shirts and the women in bright sarees, flowered lungis, and full skirts in scarlet, cerulean blue and flaring orange.

Kuttan's father walked in just as Kuttan had finished tying his crisp new dhoti. Twisting the towel deftly around his head, he asked, "Achhan, what did Karoor Nilakantha Pillai want?"

His father looked weary. "Nothing new. He told me again that he can only keep the boat that wins the race today."

Kuttan hesitated for a moment, deciding whether to tell his secret to Achhan. "No," he decided. "I won't tell him."

He took his place in the boat, with a feeling of great importance.

He was the youngest among the rowers but ... how strong he felt!

Soon they reached the placid waters of the long, wide lake that stretched through the palms and fields of the "Kuttanad."

Kuttan squinted against the bright sun, which sparkled on the water and glistened on the palms that shaded both banks of the broad, four-lane water track. He saw the high-priced ticket holders sitting on a thatched and artificial island built on one side of the finish line.

Behind them the spectators' boats were moored in a bay. And beyond the bay, and all along the other bank close by, he heard the people cheering loudly.

The boats rolled past the visitors to the start.

There was a hush. The boat pageant came first.

The president of the race gave the signal, and the "Vanchipatt" boat song filled the air as the boat pageant started.

Kuttan stared at the attractive floats. There were women holding "thalapoli," the traditional sign of welcome to the land, a flame protected by a small curved dish, decorated with flowers and coconuts. Floats of thayyam, the traditional dance of the temples of Kerala, and Kathakali, went sailing past.

Suddenly, Kuttan stopped his day-dreaming. "Oh, we're going to start!" The crackers sparkled in the air. This was the sign that the boat race was about to start.

Kuttan's hands were sweating with nervousness. Glancing down the line of spectators, he saw that Kesavan and Unni were grinning and pointing at him.

"That's what you think! Just wait and see," Kuttan said silently, keeping a straight face.

Then the track was cleared. Three gun-shots were fired in quick succession and to a roar that sent the birds squawking from the palms, the 1,600 metre race began.

Kuttan's boat surged forward. The faces of the spectators became a blur. Kuttan kept his eyes on the glistening bare back of the man rowing in front of him. Loudspeakers boomed – "Karichal II won in '85 and '86 ... very swift ... thirty rowers ... sixty to eighty strokes a minute."

"But today, just wait and see ..." The thought had barely flashed through Kuttan's mind, when the loudspeaker again boomed. "Karichal II is having a problem. Oh no! It's filling with water ... it's slowing down. It has stopped!"

Kuttan guffawed. "Serves him right!" he muttered loudly.

"Karichal I in the lead ... nearing finishing line ... and it has won!"

All the thirty crew members leapt off the boat, laughing, hugging, shouting with delight.

Sukumaran and Vasu came running. "Well!" Kuttan asked, "Did you see Kesavan's face when his boat filled with water?"

"Oh, you should have seen it," chuckled Sukumaran. "Let me describe his expression in detail ..."

Kuttan yelped with delight.

Vasu skipped alongside happily. "Oh, what a clever idea it was!" he exclaimed. "Changing the numbers of the boats and then changing their positions!!"

"Quiet, you idiot!" Kuttan hissed, scowling fiercely at Vasu.

"Oops ..." Vasu giggled behind his hand.

But it was too late!

All three fled past Kesavan and Unni, who stood rooted to the ground, eyes and mouths wide open with shock!

This story was first published in *Target* in March 1990.

HAROO THE CROC

BIJAN KUMAR GHOSH

Translated from Bangla by Swapna Dutta
Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

Shanto, Kanto, their younger sister Khuku, and Mother sat on the veranda, tense and silent. It was exactly eleven o'clock at night. Moonlight gleamed upon the trees and shrubs. It glittered across the long and narrow coconut leaves and shimmered upon the huge pond in the railway yard. Father was not home yet. Everyone except Mother had long finished dinner. Eleven o'clock was pretty late, especially by village standards!

Father used to be the station master at Canning. The people there thought a great deal of him. They even held a farewell party in his honour when the news of his sudden transfer arrived. They presented him with a garland of marigolds and a box of sweets. Kanto remembered quite clearly how a thin girl had played on the harmonium and sung the opening song: "Ah victor brave, at this dawn of your new life ..." Shanto, who was older than Kanto, soon realized, that the song was addressed to their father. But, of course, considering his age, it was rather odd to refer to "the dawn" of his new life. But then, how was one to change the words of Tagore?

They had a lot of friends at Canning. Everyone made much of them because they were the children of the station master. It was real hard luck to have to leave behind that beautiful spot by the river and settle down in this backwater – Lakshmikantapur! Everyone felt bad about it. At least Father still had some official link with Canning and visited it off and on, when he looked up old friends. But poor Shanto, Kanto and Khuku had nothing to do in Lakshmikantapur except play ludo, or listen to music on the record player. There was just not another soul to make friends with.

Time dragged on as the family waited anxiously. At last a rickshaw drew up and Father arrived, bearing an enormous earthen pot, all tied up. The children were sure that it contained either treacle, or some of those delectable sweets from Jaynagar – "mua." But Father dramatically brought out from the pot a slimy, slithery creature about twelve times larger than a lizard! Everyone shouted: "What is it, Father, what is it?"

Father said, "It's a baby crocodile, just hatched. The fishermen hauled it up while fishing in the river at Canning. They presented it to me."

"Good gracious!" cried Mother, taking a couple of steps backwards. "I've never in my life heard of such an outlandish present! Throw it out at once or the children will be scared to death!"

"Impossible," said Father. "I'm going to tame it and set a new record! What do you say, children?" Shanto, Kanto and Khuku sided with their father immediately. Mother was miserably outvoted! The baby crocodile became a special

member of the family that very night, and lapped up a bowlful of milk. Then came the question of settling him for the night. This problem, too, was speedily solved. A bed was made up for him by spreading a sack in a wooden crate. Another special family member, the tomcat, was driven out. After all, who could trust a cat?

There was great excitement that night! No one had much sleep! Mother alone was angry and grumbled away by herself. Since she was in a solitary minority, no one paid any heed to her obvious displeasure. Khuku said, "Father, shouldn't we get a mosquito-net for him? What if mosquitoes bite him at night?"

Everyone burst out laughing. Shanto had finished reading books from three libraries while they lived at Canning. So, literally bursting with general knowledge, he said, "Don't you know that rhinos and crocodiles have the toughest of hides? The mosquitoes will simply break their stings if they try to bite them!"

Kanto brought up yet another problem. "Father, crocodiles can't live without water. The Matla river is so far, far away!"

Father said, "Never mind. We have a huge pond in our yard, don't we? Haradhan can swim as much as he wants over there."

"Who is Haradhan, Father?" cried the children.

"It's the name of the crocodile. Lost Treasure. Don't you like it?"

"It's a lovely name!" cried the children, enthusiastically. "We can call him Haroo for short." Shanto made up a rhyme on the spot:

Haroo is our crocodile
Harms no one within a mile!
His tummy's fat, just like a loom
And his tail is just a broom!"

Kanto might not be as clever as his older brother but that did not mean he was going to swallow everything he said! He raised a point of order at once. "What do you mean by saying his tail is a broom? Don't you know what a broom is, silly?"

"I merely said that Haroo's tail looks like one," said Shanto.

Just then a voice shouted from the next room, "What do you mean by making up rhymes at midnight? I shall throw out the wretched crocodile tomorrow morning! Disgusting nuisance!" Everyone had to sleep after such a scolding.

But everyone was up at the crack of dawn. Haroo had a breakfast of bread and Horlicks. It was soon obvious that he had no reservations about food! A cockroach thrown by Kanto soon disappeared within his teeth. He gobbled up fish, potatoes, tomatoes, everything with equal zeal! The entire vegetable basket would have been emptied in the course of the children's experiments to find out what Haroo liked and didn't like, if mother had not appeared, rolling pin in hand!

In the resulting scramble to save the vegetables, avoid Haroo's teeth and tail, and chase off the mischievous children, mother's rolling pin landed in a few places it shouldn't have. Everyone suffered a few bruises in the tussle. Father applied mercurochrome on the children's varied

scratches and splashed Dettol on Haroo's nails and tail. Haroo nearly gobbled up the bottle of Dettol!

It soon appeared that Haroo really was beginning to get a little tame. He did not show his teeth quite so often. He realized what it meant to be taken care of.

Father brought some nylon string, tied it firmly around Haroo's waist, and threw him in the railway pond. Mother was delighted. After all, a crocodile's place was in the water! Moreover, the bottle of Horlicks had become half-empty in a single morning.

The news soon spread all over the village that Vikas babu, the station master, had brought an enormous crocodile from the Sunderbans and kept it in the railway pond so that no one could steal any fish! There was a rumour that Palan Ghosh had, with his own eyes, seen it catch a pup and dive underwater. No one heard the illegal splash of fishing-nets at night. Anglers who had sat there with fishing rods during the morning and at quiet noon times disappeared as if by magic! The village girls had often come to wash dirty clothes in the pond. Buffaloes lazed in the water after ploughing the fields. Others had been using the pond for soaking their feet. But that was all over now. And that too without Haroo having to show his teeth or tail! His very name was enough to scare them off!

Haroo loved the pond. He was not so keen to come home now. Sometimes Shanto and Kanto pulled him up by tugging at the nylon string. They stroked and petted him, and fed him on titbits brought from home. After a few days Haroo came up from the pond whenever anyone called his name. There was no need to pull him by the nylon string

any more. Staying in the pond suited him and he put on weight steadily. He soon learnt to cross the railway lines and come home on his own! He lay in the courtyard, sunbathing lazily.

Mother resented Haroo's visits even now, and grumbled loudly whenever she saw him opening the door with his pointed snout and gliding inside. "They say that crocodiles are fast disappearing from the world but just *look* at this specimen! Filling up like the moon! Nasty, horrible creature!" Mother muttered in an angry voice. "One can understand keeping parrots and mynahs as pets but a horrible beast like a crocodile! Setting a new record indeed! Crazy, utterly crazy!"

"Mother, Haroo understands every single word we speak," Shanto said in a warning voice, "So don't blame anyone if he knocks you down with his tail." Mother held her tongue after this warning!

In a few days however, Mother herself was full of praise for Haroo! Haroo had done something wonderful. He had brought home a huge fish, weighing two and a half kilograms, and the family had fish for lunch. When Father came home he was quite amazed to see the lavish spread before him. "Very good!" he said jubilantly. "Haroo can do a great deal if we train him. Every Tom, Dick and Harry has been stealing fish from our pond all these days. Now, we've also tasted it, thanks to Haroo!"

Haroo grew bolder day by day. He soon started following Father to the station. A useless weighing-machine had been lying in a corner of the platform for a long time. Haroo made a beeline for it and sat on it quietly.

Vikas babu had always been a strict station master and strongly resented anyone's travelling without a ticket. But alone he could not prevent it.

Only a few people bought monthly tickets. The railing was broken at the eastern end of the platform and travellers without tickets invariably chose this end to make a quiet exit. One morning, as soon as the village priest alighted from the 11:45 Lakshmikantapur Local and made for the broken railing, Haroo came out slithering and caught hold of his dhoti. The priest dropped his bundle of rice and bananas in panic and let out a wild scream. He would probably have fainted on the spot had Vikas babu not come running up just then! It is difficult to say why Haroo behaved the way he did. But Vikas babu just smiled and said, "Really sir, how much longer are you going to travel without a ticket, at your age! You'd better start buying tickets from now on, and travel without fear. Haroo won't attack you again if you have a ticket!"

The story spread like wild fire! It gained colour as it travelled. Everyone at the local teashop said that the Railway Minister had acquired a baby crocodile from the River Nile in Egypt. It was specially trained and belonged to a famous pedigree. If you had a ticket it would leave you alone, but try travelling without one and it would bite chunks off your body! Many claimed to have seen it happen! After all, wasn't it specially trained just for this purpose?

Govindo, the young owner of the teashop, cleared his throat loudly. Obviously he was going to say something new. Everyone looked at him. Govindo's cousin often visited

big railway offices in Calcutta, so he knew what was what. Govindo put on a know-all expression as he stirred the tea and said, "Vikas babu is going to get a promotion soon. After all, it was he who advised the Railway Minister to get the crocodile. From now on, crocodiles from the Nile will be sent wherever people travel without tickets, and Vikas babu will be sent as well, whip in hand. Fines and things are totally useless." Nearly sixteen people among the customers looked horror stricken. This meant that happy days were at an end!

Nowadays there is always a l-o-n-g queue in front of the ticket counter, both mornings, and evenings! At times Vikas babu finds it really tough to cope with it. Something else has also happened, thanks to Haroo. Loafers and crooks have stopped loitering about on the railway platform. Stray dogs used to squabble in the station yard, but Haroo's presence has scared them all off. The station is so quiet and still that one can literally hear the leaves falling!

Vikas babu has not had a promotion but he has received two certificates from the Head Office, one for having the cleanest station, and the other because of the sudden spurt in railway income from this particular station. Vikas babu is really pleased.

Shanto, Kanto and Khuku often climb up on Haroo's back and play crocodiles! But mother has not forgotten Govindo's words. "What about your promotion?" she keeps asking father.

Shanto has made up a new rhyme:

People now buy tickets
Father wins certificates
Mother gets her katla
Haroo has forgotten Matla!

Katla is a freshwater fish.

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Ramesh and the Age-old Script

Jaygopal Poddar

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

y dear Sharma moshai! Welcome, welcome!" The words were spoken in the Bangla-accented English with which Ramesh and I, though we had been in Calcutta for only four days, had already become familiar.

"Morning, Mukherjee," replied Ramesh's uncle. "Meet my nephew and his friend."

We were all standing on the steps leading up to Mr Mukherjee's ancestral house on Calcutta's S N Banerjee Road. The Mukherjees' mansion was fronted by a row of shops but the huge entrance stood out prominently. Mr Mukherjee, a middle-aged gentleman dressed in a white silk kurta and dhoti, was a colleague of Ramesh's uncle.

"Welcome boys, welcome!" beamed Mr Mukherjee. "Come, have a darshan of Durga Ma!"

We followed our host, who had generously invited us to join his family in the annual Durga Puja celebrations in the Mukherjee joint family mansion, through the entrance and a narrow corridor and suddenly found ourselves standing in a huge hall. I instinctively looked up and saw that the hall extended right up to the middle of the building,

and its ceiling was three storeys above our heads. The first and second floors were bound by railings over which people were leaning and gazing down. I lowered my eyes to see what they were gazing at. They were watching a raised marble platform at one end of the hall on which were placed five larger-than-life idols. The hall itself was crowded with people. Everybody was dressed in new clothes, and the women wore lots of jewellery. Mr Mukherjee gestured in their direction.

"All my relatives are here, today!" he declared proudly. "No matter where they are, in this country or even outside, they always come *home* in October, during Durga Puja!"

I saw a boy of about my age detach himself from a group of people and come towards us. Mr Mukherjee introduced him.

"Meet my son, Niranjan," he said. "Niranjan, I leave these boys in your care." And, saying so, he led Ramesh's uncle towards a group of men a little further off.

"We've never participated in Durga Puja celebrations before," I told Niranjan. "This is our first visit to Calcutta. It sure was kind of your father to ask Ramesh's uncle to bring us over!"

"I am glad you're here," said Niranjan, smiling.

Ramesh looked about him. "Who do those idols represent, Niranjan?" he asked.

"In the centre, standing on a lion, her ten arms holding different weapons, is Goddess Durga," replied Niranjan. "She's thrusting her spear into the evil king of the demons, who had been terrorizing the earth. To her right is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and, beyond her, with the elephant-

head, is Ganesh, the patron god of businessmen. To Durga's left is Saraswati, goddess of learning and beyond her, Kartikey, the handsome god who represents beauty. All four, as Bangla mythology has it, are the children of the mother goddess Durga."

"How long has your family been celebrating Durga Puja in this house?" I asked Niranjan.

"Oh, for over a century!" replied Niranjan, a touch of pride in his voice.

Ramesh suddenly looked interested. "You mean, this house is actually *that* old?" he asked.

Niranjan smiled. "Older," he said. "This house was built around one hundred and fifty years ago!"

Ramesh's spectacles began to glint excitedly. "Why, then this house is – is historical!" he exclaimed. "I've never been inside a house as old as this!" He looked at Niranjan and his eyes were almost pleading. "Could we explore the house a bit?" he asked.

I was shocked. "How can you make such a request, Ramesh!" I exclaimed, terribly embarrassed by my friend's presumptuousness.

"You can't go ferreting around somebody's house as if it's a tourist attraction!"

But, Ramesh, as usual, ignored my wet blanket treatment. He continued to look pleadingly at Niranjan.

"I'm flattered you find my house so interesting," said Niranjan, smiling broadly. "I don't think we'll disturb anybody. They're all down here watching the morning puja. Come along!"

I hesitated. My eyes wandered to the marble platform

on which two priests sat, in front of the idols, surrounded by huge plates full of fruits, sweets, gifts and offerings. The air was heavy with incense. Four drummers stood in front of the platform and beat a rapid-fire hypnotic rhythm. They were accompanied by the beating of gongs.

"Er ... won't they be serving prasad soon?" I asked Niranjan, my eyes lingering longingly on the plates of fruits and sweets. "I think the puja is about to finish ..."

Ramesh made a face. "Now, don't be a greedy hog, yaar!" he exclaimed loudly, making heads turn and I blushed with embarrassment. "The prasad won't run away!"

"Don't worry!" grinned Niranjan. "I'll make it a quick tour."

We followed Niranjan up a huge marble staircase. On reaching the first floor, he turned into a large doorway.

We found ourselves standing inside a massive, high-ceilinged room. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling in the exact centre of the room. Beautiful furniture, clearly of great antique value, was neatly arranged around the room. The walls were adorned with paintings and family portraits.

"Our drawing room!" announced Niranjan. "Some of the furniture dates back to the last century!"

Ramesh whistled as he gazed around him. "This room was certainly built for a *big* family!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. We have a lot of relatives, and they all made it a point to attend *this* Durga Puja." Niranjan's expression became sad. "It's probably the *last* Durga Puja we're going to celebrate in this house!"

Ramesh looked quickly at Niranjan. "What do you mean?" he asked.

Niranjan smiled wryly. "It's a pretty expensive affair, you know," he said. "And the family doesn't have much money left. High taxes and increasing costs have eaten into the ancestral property. And my father certainly can't afford to host such a festival on only his salary!"

"It'll be a great pity if this family custom ends now!" I observed.

"I don't think we've much choice in the matter," murmured Niranjan softly. He quickly shook himself. "Anyway, we're certainly celebrating *this* Durga Puja in style! Come on, let me show you the next room, now. If we don't hurry through this tour, our friend here will miss his prasad!"

The room Niranjan next took us to was clearly a library. It was a vast room with shelves filled with books lining all the walls. Most of the shelves were dusty and the books looked old and little used.

Ramesh darted forward eagerly. He had the air of an archaeologist who has just discovered a Mohenjodaro. As he paused before a bookcase whose contents were coated with a layer of dust an inch thick, he uttered a noise that sounded like glue pouring out of a jug.

I recognized the symptoms.

Sure enough, an excited Ramesh turned a pleading face to Niranjan. "Could I have a look at some of these old books?" he asked. "They don't seem to have been touched for years and years! Maybe there's a very valuable book lying forgotten in one of these shelves!"

Niranjan hesitated for only a moment. "Go ahead!" he replied. "It won't harm the books to get a little dusting!"

The sound of the drums and gongs, which had been following us wherever we went, ceased abruptly. I looked at Niranjan. "Er ... has the morning puja come to an end?" I asked meaningfully.

Niranjan smiled. "Yes," he replied. "Should we go down?"

I nearly licked my lips, "Yes, let's do that!" I said, happy that Niranjan was so understanding.

We left Ramesh in the library and hurried down to the hall. When we returned, armed with packets of prasad, we found Ramesh sitting in front of a table piled high with books. He was holding a small wooden box. He looked up when we entered, his face flushed with excitement.

"Look what I've found in one corner of a bookcase!" exclaimed Ramesh, holding up the box.

"What's inside?" asked Niranjan, interested.

"This!" announced Ramesh, and, in the manner of a conjuror pulling a rabbit out of his hat, he opened the box and carefully drew out a rolled up paper. Putting the box on his lap, he slowly unrolled the piece of yellowing paper and then handed it to Niranjan. I craned my neck to look.

There were only four lines of thin, spidery writing, very faint. I couldn't understand it, but knew the script was Bangla.

"It looks like a small poem," said Niranjan slowly. "I've absolutely no idea who could have written it!"

"What does it say?" asked Ramesh quickly.

"Well, I'm not good at translating poems from Bangla to English," replied Niranjan apologetically, "But I'll try to give you the *meaning* of each line." He raised the piece of

paper closer to his face and peered intently at the words. "This is how it goes: Neither summer nor winter ... Mother has come home ... beneath the peacock ... number the petals ..."

There was a brief silence.

"Sounds Greek to me," I said, trying to be witty.

Ramesh ignored me. His brow had creased into a puzzled frown. "Why has this poem been preserved like this in this box?" he asked Niranjan.

"I've no idea," replied our host. "This is the first time *I've* seen this paper or the box. I don't think my father knows about them either!"

"You mean, there's *no* way we can find out who wrote this poem and why it's been preserved?" asked Ramesh, sounding very disappointed.

Niranjan scratched his head. "Well, perhaps my grandfather knows something about it," he said hesitantly. "Since the puja is over, he must have come upstairs and gone to his room. We can go and ask him."

Ramesh jumped to his feet as if a spring had just been released under him. "That's a good idea!" he exclaimed. "Let's go!"

"Hey, hold it, yaar!" I cried agitatedly. "When are we going to eat the prasad?"

"Later, later," said Ramesh impatiently.

"All right, let's go," agreed Niranjan, handing the yellow paper back to Ramesh to roll up and replace inside the box.

We hurried out of the library. Niranjan led us down a long corridor and stopped before a small door. He knocked.

"Who is it?" We heard a soft voice from behind the door.

"Dadu, it's me," replied Niranjan. "My friends would like to meet you."

"Come in," invited the soft voice.

We obeyed and found ourselves standing in a small room sparingly furnished with a bed, a desk and some chairs. On one of the chairs, by the window, sat an old man. He smiled at us.

"Welcome boys," said Niranjan's grandfather. "I hope you are enjoying the Durga Puja."

"Yes, sir, we are," replied Ramesh. He opened the box in his hands and took out the piece of paper. "We just discovered this in the library," he said, handing the paper to Niranjan's grandfather.

Niranjan's grandfather unrolled the paper and ran his eyes over the words written on it. And, as he did so, his face brightened.

"I'd almost forgotten about this poem," he murmured softly.

"Do you know who wrote it, Dadu?" asked Niranjan.

Niranjan's grandfather looked up. "Yes," he replied. "My grandfather – your great-great-grandfather – wrote it. As far as I know, it's the only poem he ever wrote. It was found amongst his possessions after he had died. The handwriting is his. It was preserved, as were all his other possessions, because, as you know, your great-great-grandfather is a family hero!"

Ramesh's head jerked up. He looked like an infant who's suddenly spotted an ice-cream parlour. "Was your

great-great-grandfather a freedom fighter or something?" he asked Niranjan.

Niranjan smiled proudly. "Well, he was one of the few who stood up to Lord Curzon, the viceroy of that time!" He looked at his grandfather. "Dadu, isn't there a story about hidden treasure connected with my great-great-grandfather?" he asked.

Niranjan's grandfather looked thoughtful. "Well, yes, there is a story," he replied slowly.

Ramesh could hardly control his excitement. "*Please* tell us the story," he implored.

Niranjan's grandfather smiled. "All right!" he said. "I'll tell you." He shifted slightly in his seat and then began: "As you must have studied in your history books, in 1905 the then viceroy, Lord Curzon, initiated a move to partition the state of Bengal, which was the seat of Indian Nationalism in those days. Well, this sparked off a big agitation against the move in which my family played an active part. Word spread that the British were planning to arrest the male members of the family. So it was decided that the whole family should leave the city for some time and lie low in a house they had near Siliguri in North Bengal. The story goes that, before leaving, my grandfather – Niranjan's great-great-grandfather – who was the head of the family then, hid some of the family wealth in order to safeguard it from possible looters. Unfortunately, he died before the family could return to Calcutta after things had quietened down and so nobody knows *where* he had hidden the treasure – if, at all, he had hidden any such treasure in the first place!"

All through the narrative Ramesh had been sitting on

the edge of his chair, tensely clasping and unclasping his hands. Now he exclaimed, "You mean that, at this very moment, there's a treasure trove hidden somewhere in *this* house?"

Niranjan's grandfather smiled. "I didn't say *that*," he replied. "Nobody knows whether the story is true or not!"

At that moment, the sound of a gong reached our ears.

"Ah!" exclaimed Niranjan. "The midday bhog will be served now." He looked at me and grinned. "I think you'll find it delicious!"

I hastily got to my feet. "Then, shoudn't we go and ... participate?" I indicated the packets of prasad I was still holding in my hands. "We haven't eaten anything since morning."

"Yes, you boys go downstairs and have bhog," agreed Niranjan's grandfather.

The bhog was, indeed, delicious. It was a mixture of rice, dal and vegetables. Niranjan kept referring to it as khichuri. It was followed by paish, a very sweet rice pudding. I ate heartily.

Ramesh, however, barely touched his food. He lingered over the khichuri in an absentminded sort of way and looked too preoccupied to pay much attention to the paish. Suddenly towards the end of the meal, his head shot up with a jerk. He grabbed my arm, nearly causing me to drop my spoonful of sweet rice over my shirt.

"Hey! Watch it!" I exclaimed.

"Listen!' cried Ramesh breathlessly, his spectacles beginning to glint. "I've just got an idea about that treasure!"

Niranjan looked astounded. "What clue?" he exclaimed.

Ramesh put on his Sherlock Holmes manner. "Didn't your grandfather say that the lines written on the paper found in the library constitute the only poem your great-great-grandfather ever wrote in his life? Well, maybe he wrote it as a clue to where the treasure is hidden!"

My mouth fell open. "Impossible!" I exclaimed.

"Why?" asked Ramesh quickly. "It's certainly very possible and I think we should have a go at deciphering the poem."

Niranjan nodded his head slowly. "How wonderful it'll be if there really is a hidden treasure and we manage to discover it!" he exclaimed. "Let's go up to the library!"

I made as if to protest, but seeing the determined look on the faces of the other two, decided to play along with them. Reluctantly discarding all thoughts of having a third helping of rice pudding, I followed Ramesh and Niranjan.

Once again we were in the library, Niranjan reading out the meaning of each line of the poem on the yellowing paper. "This is how it goes," said Niranjan. "Neither summer nor winter ... Mother has come home ... beneath the peacock ... number the petals ..."

There was a brief silence.

"Well," I said, after a pause, "That sounds like a most unlikely clue to a hidden treasure."

Ramesh looked pityingly at me. "Naturally, yaar!" he exclaimed. "If the message was obvious to one and all, then the hidden treasure wouldn't be much of a secret, would it?"

Niranjan looked at Ramesh anxiously. "Can you decipher it?" he asked.

Ramesh put on his Sherlock Holmes manner again. "Well, let's consider each line separately. What does the first line say? *Neither summer nor winter!* The reference is clearly to the *seasons*. An in-between season, perhaps? There are two alternatives – spring and autumn. Maybe, the next line will make the picture clearer!"

"The next line says: *Mother has come home*," Niranjan repeated.

"Mother ..." murmured Ramesh thoughtfully. "*Whose* mother?" His brow creased into a frown. "Reading the first two lines together the poem is clearly referring to somebody's mother who has come home either in the spring or in the autumn."

My head was beginning to spin a little. Niranjan broke in, his eyes sparkling. "Ramesh, what would you call the *current* season?" he asked.

"You mean *now*, in the month of October?" queried Ramesh. "Why, autumn, I suppose!"

Niranjan jumped to his feet. "Then the mother this poem is referring to must be Durga Ma!" he exclaimed excitedly. "She's the mother goddess who's come to Earth. Every autumn, she descends from the Himalayas, where she lives with Shiva, her husband, and comes to her father's house for a visit. That's what Durga Puja is all about!"

Ramesh stared at Niranjan and then his face broke into a wide smile. "That's it, then!" he declared. "The message of the poem is clear! The treasure is hidden in the idol of the Goddess Durga!"

For a few seconds, nobody spoke. I stared at Ramesh in amazement. Niranjan broke the silence. "No," he said

firmly. "The treasure is *not* hidden in the idol of Durga Ma."

Ramesh looked puzzled. "How are you so sure?" he asked.

Niranjan smiled. "You jumped to that conclusion because you don't know our customs," he replied. "All the idols downstairs are a few months old! Every year, on Bijoya Dashmi – the fifth and last day of Durga Puja – all the idols, which have been worshipped during the previous four days, are taken to the banks of the Ganga and *immersed* in the waters! This symbolizes Durga Ma's return to her husband's home after her short visit to her father's house. So, you see, the idols used in my great-great-grandfather's time have, long ago, been sunk in the Ganga!"

Ramesh's face fell. He looked like a cricketer who, having strode out jauntily to the wicket, suddenly discovers that he has forgotten to bring his bat. It was not often that Ramesh made a bloomer and the experience was clearly very painful to him.

"Anyway," continued Niranjan, "From all accounts, my ancestors fled to Siliguri some time in the winter months. There would be no idols then – either of Goddess Durga or her children – to hide treasures in!"

Ramesh looked apologetic. "I ... uh ... didn't know all this," he said shamefacedly. "I was in too much of a hurry to jump to conclusions!"

"What does the next line say?" I asked. "Something to do with peacocks, I think?"

"Yes," replied Niranjan. He looked at the yellowed paper in his hands. "It says: *Beneath the peacock.*" Niranjan looked puzzled. "What peacock?" he asked.

Ramesh's brow creased into a frown. Then he snapped his fingers. "Do you have any *pictures* or *engravings* of peacocks in this house?" he asked.

Niranjan looked doubtful. "Not that I know of," he replied. "If there was any such picture or engraving, I'm sure I would have noticed!"

"There *must* be!" insisted Ramesh. "And this peacock is, somehow, *connected with Durga Puja*!"

A sudden flash of light seemed to blaze upon Niranjan. He sat up with a jerk. "Of course!" he exclaimed.

Ramesh had the air of a policeman who knows that he is just a few minutes away from nabbing a gang of cat-burglars. "Where?" he asked quickly. "Where is this peacock?"

Niranjan composed himself. "I don't know whether you noticed," he began, "but each of the gods and goddesses downstairs is sitting or standing on some kind of a *carrier*. Durga Ma is on a lion. Lakshmi is on an owl. Saraswati is sitting on a swan. Ganesh is reclining on a rat. And Kartikeya, the god of beauty, is *sitting on a peacock!*"

By now, even I had begun to feel the excitement of a hunter hot on a scent. "Wow!" I exclaimed. I looked at Niranjan excitedly. "What does the last line of the poem say?"

Niranjan once again raised the eighty-year-old scroll of paper. His hands, I saw, were trembling slightly. "The last line reads: *Count the petals.*"

Ramesh murmured to himself: "Beneath the peacock ... count the petals ..." He looked at Niranjan. "Tell me, what's *beneath* the peacock downstairs?"

Niranjan slowly rolled up the scroll of paper in his hands. "The floor, of course!" he said finally. "What else?"

"No flowers?" asked Ramesh.

"Not that I know of."

Ramesh got to his feet. "Well, I think we'll have to take a close look at the idol of Kartikeya," he observed. "Let's go down."

Niranjan quickly put the scroll back into its box and returned it to the bookshelf. We hurried down.

The afternoon puja had ended. Prasad was being distributed by one of the priests. As we moved towards the marble platform on which the idols stood, the priest beckoned us to take some prasad.

Niranjan remembered his duties as a host. "Yes, take some prasad," he said, and piloted us towards the priest.

I cupped my hands and received a packet of sweets and fruits. Ramesh also cupped his hands and the priest handed him a packet of prasad, too.

Ramesh did not move.

I stared in amazement at my bespectacled friend, who seemed to have suddenly frozen into a statue, his arms still upraised, the packet of prasad in his cupped hands.

"*Ramesh*!" I hissed. "What's up?" Ramesh was staring fixedly at the marble platform behind the priest. There was a glazed look in his eyes. I nudged Ramesh. "What's wrong?" I exclaimed.

Ramesh came to life. He pointed to the marble platform in front of us. I looked at the surface of the marble platform.

And then I understood.

Carved on the surface of the marble platform was an intricate design of loops and circles and, at frequent intervals, beautifully engraved *flowers*. I grabbed Niranjan's arm. "Look at the designs!" I exclaimed. "Don't they cover the entire platform?"

"They sure do!" replied Niranjan, equally excited.

Ramesh quickly grabbed both Niranjan and me by the arms and motioned us to follow him. We quickly moved to a quiet corner of the hall. "Listen," said Ramesh quickly, looking at Niranjan. "Are those idols always arranged the way they are now?"

"Yes," replied Niranjan, catching the drift. "Kartikeya is always placed to the left of Saraswati who is always left of Durga. And, the idols are always placed in the slight semi-circle that you see now."

"That means," concluded Ramesh triumphantly, "That earlier idols of Kartikeya must have covered the *same flower* which the present idol has been placed over!"

"Yes," agreed Niranjan, nodding his head vigorously.

"Then that engraved flower is the one the poem is referring to!" cried Ramesh with a victorious smile.

"You must be right," I agreed. "But the poem talks of *counting* the petals of the flower. What'll we achieve by doing that?"

"I don't know," said Ramesh impatiently. "Not yet, anyway. We must do things one step at a time." He looked at Niranjan. "First, we must uncover the flower."

Niranjan looked doubtful. "That will mean moving the idol of Kartikeya. I'm not sure we'll be allowed to do that."

I broke in hastily. "There's really no hurry, you know."

I said quickly. "The idols will be here for only four more days. Then, they'll be taken to the river and immersed. After that we can spend all the time we want inspecting the engraved flower."

Niranjan looked at Ramesh. "That makes sense," he said.

Ramesh looked uncertain for a moment and then gave in. "Well, if there *is* an eighty-year-old hidden treasure," he said, with a half-hearted smile, "I guess it can wait another four days to be discovered!"

The next four days must have been the longest Ramesh had ever lived through. Impatient by nature, he could barely control his excitement at the thought of being on the threshold of a major discovery. The delay irritated him and he wore the air of a wild beast straining at the leash.

I, on the other hand, enjoyed the Durga Puja festivities thoroughly – the morning and evening pujas, the drumming, the gongs, the chanting, the incense, the prasad, the meals, the variety of cultural programmes, the people, the comings and goings and the visiting of other centres of worship in other parts of the city, all kept me preoccupied and in a sort of happy trance. I did not, of course, forget about our search for the hidden treasure, but I did not give it much thought during those four hectic days.

Finally, Bijoya Dashmi, the last day of Durga Puja, arrived. Ramesh's uncle, Ramesh and I accompanied the Mukherjee household, in procession, to the banks of the Ganga. There we saw the five idols, along with hundreds of other idols from all over Calcutta, being immersed in the waters of the holy river.

We returned to the Mukherjee house, everybody a little sad. Ramesh, Niranjan and I immediately made a beeline for the marble platform in the hall. We mounted the steps and rushed over to the spot where the idol of Kartikeya had stood. Sure enough, on the exact spot where the idol of the god of beauty and his peacock had stood was an engraved flower!

I stared at the flower and did a quick count. "The flower has nine petals," I said. "What are we supposed to do now?" You could almost *hear* the machinery of Ramesh's brain working overtime. "The poem tells us to count the petals," he observed. "But the number of petals – nine – doesn't seem to carry any message. My guess is that we're supposed to *do something* while counting the petals!"

Niranjan looked thoughtful. "Maybe we're expected to *touch* the petals?" he suggested.

Ramesh's face lit up. "Of course!" he exclaimed. "That's how hidden safes and trapdoors are opened in detective stories! We must *press* each petal! That'll release the concerned springs!"

With Ramesh, thought is always quickly followed by action. He crouched over the engraved flower petals and pressed them one after the other.

Nothing happened. What an anti-climax! "Try again," urged Niranjan. "You might not have got the right petal to start with."

It was on the third round that our patience was rewarded. Then, suddenly, with a tiny whirring sound, a small portion of the marble floor a little above the engraved flower slid to one side revealing a gaping hole!

Niranjan lowered his arms into the hole and lifted out one of the three bags inside. The cloth bag, rotten with age, came to pieces in his hands and a glittering mass of gold and silver ornaments fell on the floor!

We stared at this dazzling spectacle for a few seconds, our breathing suspended. Then, Ramesh quickly lifted out another bag. This, too, burst and a pile of gold and silver coins poured out!

Niranjan was lifting out the third bag from the hole when I heard footsteps and raising my head, saw Mr Mukherjee and Ramesh's uncle hurrying towards us.

"Aren't you boys coming up to have dinner?" asked Mr Mukherjee. Then his eyes fell on the dazzling array of glittering wealth around us and both he and Ramesh's uncle stopped in their tracks in amazement.

"What ... what *is* all this?" stammered Mr Mukherjee, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

Niranjan slowly got to his feet. He smiled broadly. "Father, we *can* celebrate Durga Puja again next year," he said quietly but with a note of triumph in his voice, "And for many, many more years to come!"

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My Brother's Great Invention

ANITA RAU BADAMI

Illustrated by Aparajita Singh

ho put that water bag here?" roared my father from the front doorstep.

"Your burglar alarm," I hissed to my brother Anand who was getting ready to disappear from the house. Ma rushed in to see what the racket was all about and found Papa standing there, sopping wet and scowling black thunder.

"I want to know who is behind this nonsense," Papa said grimly.

"I think it's supposed to be a burglar alarm," Ma said, in a soothing voice.

"I don't care what it's supposed to be," Papa said. "Where's that boy? I'm sure he rigged this up."

Anand had vanished by this time and reappeared only after dinner, when Papa had cooled down.

Before this story, let me put you in the picture. I am Anita, fourteen years old, plump and tall. My brother Anand, one year younger than me, caused all that hoo-ha with his burglar alarm. And this is not the first time he's got on Papa's nerves or frightened someone half to death in the house. The trouble with him is that he thinks he is a scientist. He loves tinkering with all sorts of electrical

gadgets, tools, dynamos, planks of wood and things like that. And he keeps creating "inventions" that never work out as they are supposed to. Like that electric guitar. The silly chap wired up my precious guitar and plugged it in. Of course he didn't try it out himself but told me that I'd get a fantastic sound if I played. Sound there was – from me, not my guitar! I got a nice shock, and Anand a good yelling from Papa and Ma.

Another time he made a projector that kept catching fire and spoilt half our slides. And now there was this burglar alarm. Recently there had been a rush of thefts in the colony and Anand had got it into his head that what was needed was a burglar alarm. So the minute Papa left for the office and Ma for the market, he started on his latest scheme. As usual I had to be involved, though I'd have preferred to finish my novel. "If you get a shelling, don't bring me in," I warned Anand.

"Nothing will go wrong this time. I've planned it out carefully. See the blue-print." Anand loves words like blue-print – it makes him feel professional! Anyway, I looked at the elaborate drawing of doors, wires and bells and asked, "How does this thing work?"

"It's quite simple. The moment the door opens, this alarm is tripped off and makes a clanging sound. Then this water bag here is loosened and falls on the thief's head. By then we call the police – simple!"

"But how does the alarm know that a burglar is opening the door?"

I've taken care of that," Anand said loftily. I had my own doubts about the alarm's guessing powers, but kept

them to myself because when Anand is in one of his inventive moods, nothing stops him.

So with me doing the dirty work like standing on tables and holding up the wires for hours, the burglar alarm was installed. "I still don't see how it's supposed to know when a thief is trying to get in," I protested looking in dismay at the mess in the hall.

"You see," Anand explained smugly, "A thief tries to open the door stealthily. I've rigged it up so that the alarm works only when the door is opened gently."

I was sceptical. "Remember, if Papa asks, I'm not involved," I warned. "Now clean up this mess before anyone gets home."

As you already know, my doubts about the alarm were quite justified. Papa, who always opens the door softly, was thoroughly soaked and angry as angry could be. Anyway, for a week after this, Anand did not dare try out anything new. Then we saw this film *Back to the Future*. I don't know if you have seen it, but it's all about a time machine. Well, that was the end of peace and quiet in the house.

My brother decided that he had to make a time machine too. Papa locked up his tool box and hid the key while Ma kept a wary eye on her oven and mixer. Because, as I told you, when Anand is on one of his inventing binges he takes apart all the gadgets in the house to collect parts. You can't imagine the noise that was going on – hammering and sawing and clattering. Unfortunately we were in the middle of our vacations so there was no let up at all. Anand's room, next to our bedroom was transformed into a network of wires, springs, levers and bulbs. There was an enormous

panel which was to be the control switchboard. As for Anand, he went around looking like a savage. When Ma didn't notice, the fellow didn't even comb his hair.

This time I refused to be drawn into his schemes, though as the days went by my curiosity grew. But Anand just wouldn't let anyone into his room.

Finally, after a fortnight of frantic activity, the time machine was ready. "We can try it out tonight," Anand announced to everyone at home at lunch time.

"I don't know what you've been up to in that room, but you're NOT trying out anything new," Papa said firmly.

"But it's a time machine. I've invented it," Anand protested.

"When I say no, I mean no," Papa said, glaring.

"Poor boy," Ma said noticing Anand's crestfallen look. "At least let's take a look at it."

Papa sighed. "All right, but if the house falls it's your fault."

As it turned out, we could not try out the time machine that day at all. We had guests and by the time they left everyone was too tired to experience one of Anand's creations. The next day, Papa and Ma were going to Kharagpur, a few hours away from Calcutta, for a wedding. Ma was worried about leaving us alone, but we reassured her. "We're old enough to look after ourselves, Ma," I said. "And we can go next door to Sharma Aunty if we need anything."

"And it's only one night," Anand added.

"All right. But promise me you won't do anything with that time machine till we come back," Ma said sternly, looking

at Anand. He promised half-heartedly, offended at this lack of respect for his creation. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was sure the thing wouldn't work, but it felt good to know that there would be no catastrophe during my parents' absence.

They left by the afternoon train and were coming back the following evening. Ma had made dinner so we ate and after watching the serial on television, we went to bed. Anand fell asleep immediately, but I stayed up to finish a novel. At about eleven thirty I thought I heard a scratching at the front door. Telling myself it was only my imagination I went back to the book. A little later there was a rattle and a click. I was really scared, I can tell you, what with a murder story before me and then strange noises in the middle of the night! I shook Anand and whispered, "Listen, there's someone at the door."

"Go and open it then," he muttered groggily.

"Idiot! Someone's trying to get in," I said.

Anand sat up. "Who? What?"

"I don't know," I said. "What shall we do?"

"Let's holler for help," he said. But before we could do anything, the door swung open and we found ourselves looking at a ruffianly fellow with a green scarf around his neck. Anand gasped.

"Hey, it's that new sweeper Boppa!" I whispered. It was indeed the fellow who swept out the compounds in our row of houses. So he was the thief, and no wonder. He knew exactly when the occupants were out, leaving the coast clear.

The fellow gave an evil grin. "One squeak out of you

and see what happens," he said, brandishing his cudgel and backing out of the room. We heard him slide the latch in.

"What do we do now?" I asked in a low voice.

"Let's shout anyway," Anand suggested.

The door opened suddenly again in the middle of our discussion.

"No noise from you! Now, where is your father's room?"

I was about to direct him upstairs, when Anand said quickly, "The one next to this one."

"You silly goose!" I said angrily as soon as the man had gone.

"That's your room. He'll come back as mad as mad can be."

"At least it will give us some time to think of something," Anand said. "He'll take a while to locate the light switch. Let's shout." All of a sudden there was a crash followed by a loud scream. More strange noises emerged from the next room – a few muffled thumps, an eerie whine and a low, humming sound.

"My time machine, he's started it!" Anand gasped. "I wish we could get out of this room and see what is happening out there."

There was another howl, much fainter this time, and a great deal of clattering. We shouted for all we were worth. In a few minutes, we heard footsteps running up our drive. Thankfully we recognized Mrs Sharma's voice, along with her husband and Dr Mohan – also a neighbour.

"Anand! Anita! Children, what's the matter? Where are you?"

"Here!" we shouted in unison. In a minute the door was unlocked.

"What on earth has been happening here, children?" Sharma Uncle asked. Both Anand and I fell over ourselves trying to explain. "Where is the fellow now?"

"The last we heard, he was in the time machine," I explained hastily, seeing everyone looking rather puzzled.

We entered the room cautiously and turned on the lights. The time machine was still humming softly but otherwise there was no other sound from the room.

"Well, where is he?" Dr Mohan asked, peering behind the door. "Did you imagine this?"

"Oh no," I protested. "How could both of us have imagined the same thing?"

"Maybe he ran out," Anand suggested.

"I'm sure we'd have seen him. There's only one way out of this house and we came the same way as soon as we heard you," Sharma Uncle sounded very sure.

"Look!" Anand said, pointing to the floor. "He was wearing that." Near the panel of switches was the green scarf.

"Let's search the house – perhaps he's still around," Dr Mohan said, going upstairs.

Boppa was nowhere to be seen. "Well, maybe he did run out and we missed him," Mrs Sharma said at last, "I can't imagine what else could have happened."

"My time machine! He's gone through that!" Anand burst out, his eyes shining.

"What an imagination this boy has," Mr Sharma said, smiling indulgently. "Now off to bed, both of you. I'll spend

the night here so you needn't worry about any more intruders now."

Needless to say, Boppa the sweeper was never seen again. Anand insists that his time machine worked and he disappeared into the past. The machine itself was dismantled because Papa thought it wasn't safe (maybe he also had a niggling suspicion that it worked), so we couldn't try it out. Perhaps Boppa is now among some dinosaurs in a pre-historic world. I really don't know what to believe. What do you think?

As for Anand, he is convinced that he is a genius and has launched a new project – something about a telephone to contact creatures in outer space. Tell you all about it next time.

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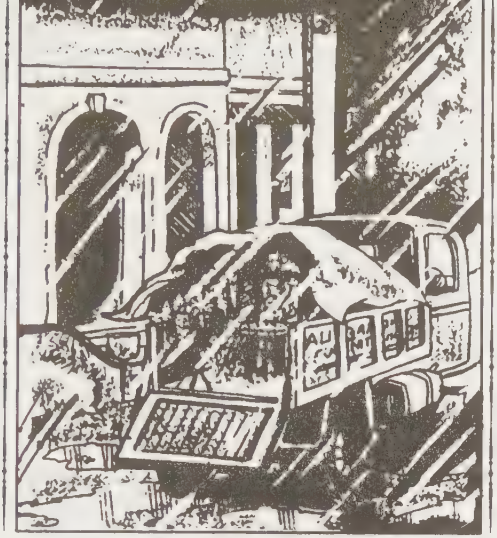

FASTER FENAY MOVES OUT

B R BHAGWAT

Translated from Marathi by D R Bhagwat
Illustrated by Tapas Guha

Faster Fenay's first name was, of course, not Faster. It just couldn't be. It is not a Marathi name; in fact you wouldn't find it in any Indian language. His name was Banesh Fenay. It was his amazing agility and fast-moving brain that had earned him his nickname at a very early age and it had stuck! Banesh, Banya to his pals, was a boarder at the Vidya Mandir School in Pune. His native place was Fursungi, a small village some thirteen miles from Pune. Every Saturday, after school was over, Banya used to take out his bicycle and ride it home to spend the weekend with his parents.

Banya was only in his early teens, but we have yet to come across so young a man who has gone through so many adventures! In fact, adventure was second nature to him. He couldn't turn his back on any situation, however risky or daunting it might seem to others. He would face it head-on and would usually emerge victorious.

On this particular Saturday evening, our young hero was not alone. All Banya's pals had a standing invitation to visit his home whenever they wished and this week his close friend Subhash Desai had agreed to come. An uncle of

Subhash owned a bungalow on the road to Saswad. The uncle lived at Jalgaon but every summer he would come down and stay for a while in this bungalow. He had recently bought a plot of land next to his own bungalow. Construction was soon to start and bricks, beams and other building materials were lying around the bungalow and on the site. A bhayya watchman, who had been hired, stayed there.

As they left the city and started for Fursungi, Subhash remarked, "Banya, the weather's fine today. On our way I'll show you my uncle's house."

The weather was indeed fair. But as they crossed Hadapsar, dark clouds gathered and it started to drizzle. In a few minutes, there were heavy showers and the boys got drenched. It was difficult to ride on, and soon they had to get off their bikes and race for shelter under a big tree.

"Shall we stay here till the rain stops," Subhash asked after a while, "Or shall we go ahead?"

But Faster Fenay suggested that if they pedalled fast, they would reach the Fursungi crossing in another fifty or sixty minutes. "We'll have to drop the idea of visiting your uncle's bungalow," he added. "Perhaps on our way back on Monday morning ..."

They sped off towards Fursungi, but pedalling the bikes in the downpour proved exhausting, and the tyres were skidding on the muddy road. After ten minutes Subhash began to pant heavily. "How far to Fursungi?" he gasped.

"Oh, about four miles to the crossing," said Banya, "But then, we have to go about a mile inside before we reach my home."

"Honestly, Banya," Subhash wailed, "I don't think I

could manage that much."

"Eh? What do you suggest?"

"I've an idea, Banya," Subhash said. "Over there ahead. Do you see that heap of white inkpots?"

"Those aren't inkpots, silly," Banya said, slowing down. "Those are china clay caps to be fitted on telegraph poles."

"Maybe," Subhash said. "Anyway, the path next to that heap goes right up to our bungalow. Look! There's the roof. What do you say? Let's stay overnight."

"Not a bad idea," Banya conceded. "But the house will be locked. Who's got the keys?"

"The bhayya should have them," Subhash said. "How about it? Much better than getting more soaked than we already are."

In a few minutes they were at the place. But something unexpected awaited them. A large truck was parked in the compound. Even in the fading daylight and rain, they could read the board on the front of the truck. "Alibaba Furniture Removing Company." The letters were both in English and Devnagari, and seemed newly painted. A tarpaulin was spread over the back of the truck. There was nobody in the driver's seat. In fact, there was nobody to be seen in the entire compound. The watchman wasn't in sight either. He must have gone inside with the truck-walas. What was going on? What goods were being removed?

"T-TTOCK ..." exclaimed Faster Fenay. This was a characteristic sound that he uttered every time he sensed something odd.

They got down from their bikes. "I can't make it out,"

muttered Subhash. "Just two days back I got a letter from Uncle. He didn't mention anything about removing furniture or buying anything new. Perhaps some pieces are being removed for repairs. I'll ask the bhayya."

"Wait a bit," said Banya. "We'll go to the back garden. Come on!"

If Subhash was slightly surprised at this suggestion, he said nothing. They pushed their bikes over the wet grass to the back.

Banya said, "Now, I'll just stay here with the bikes. You go to the front again, enter the house and ask those fellows what all this is about. But be careful, will you?"

Subhash came to the front only to find the steps to the door blocked. Four persons were coming out of the house, carrying a big wooden almirah with glass doors. Subhash had to step back. With difficulty the men loaded the almirah onto the truck and began to cover it with the large tarpaulin. Subhash could see another almirah – a Godrej – already in the truck. One of his Uncle's.

The men were coming back to the front steps when Subhash stepped forward and said, "Who are you? What are you doing?"

At his sudden appearance, the men looked only slightly surprised. A bearded fellow – apparently their leader – glared at him and growled, "Can't you read that sign? We're removing things."

"I can see that," Subhash said, "But why?"

"Why? Because we have orders! Removing furniture is our business," said the man simply.

"Order? Whose orders?" Subhash asked.

"The Seth's orders. Who else?" The man had now raised his voice, but suddenly grinned and added, "Anyway, what's that to you? Who are you? How did you come here?"

"On my bike," Subhash said. "But where is the watchman?"

"Bhayya gaya chayya pineko (the bhayya has gone for his tea)," quipped the man and laughed at his own joke. "He has given us the keys. Who are you, kid?"

"I'm the nephew of the owner of this bungalow." Subhash explained. "If the bhayya gave you the keys, why isn't he here to help you with the job? Will you please show me the removal order?"

"Sure, sure," said the man. He shouted to one of his men, "Sakharam, where's that yellow order paper? The chhota seth wants to see it." His tone was sarcastic.

"The order paper? Why? I gave it to the bhayya," replied the man called Sakharam.

Bhayya again ... Subhash mused. I don't like the look of things here. Is it possible that they really are furniture removers? But then, where is the bhayya? As far as I know, the bhayya is an honest fellow. He can't be party to this gang's doings.

"Come inside, Chhota Seth," the bearded man was saying. He took the boy's arm. "Be assured. We are not thieves or burglars!"

He let Subhash into the bungalow. In the hall, both the cots were in their places. The two cupboards were already removed. The tables and chairs were stacked near the door. The wall clock showed twenty minutes past six.

"Pick up the table," the burly man ordered his men,

"And the two big mirrors. Easy with them. We don't want to break anything." "These men are just ransacking the house," Subhash thought. "Do they take this bungalow to be the fabulous Alibaba's Cave?"

The big man had turned his back and was almost out of the door. Immediately, Subhash bent across the cot and opened the window behind it slightly. He knew that Banya was waiting outside.

"Banya," he whispered, "I don't like this. Something fishy is going on here. Be on guard!"

Subhash turned back, just as the bearded man came in from the veranda. He couldn't, of course, guess that Subhash had a friend waiting outside. But he was no longer smiling. He came up to Subhash and glared at him. "Now's the time to get rid of you, bachchamji. We'll let you sleep ..."

He took out a tiny bottle from his jacket, emptied some drops from it onto his handkerchief, grabbed the boy's wrist with his left hand and pressed the cloth to his nose. There was nothing Subhash could do. "Heh ... heh ... heh!" he roared gleefully as poor Subhash lost consciousness and slid down onto the floor.

Faster Fenay, crouching outside, not only heard the devilish laugh; he watched, through a small opening in the window shutter, all the goings-on inside. Leaving Subhash with a villainous "Happy dreams!" the man joined his men outside. Banya heard him shouting orders.

Banya lost no time. He opened the window and jumped inside. He was staring anxiously at his friend when he sensed some movement outside. Swiftly he closed the

window and hid himself under the cot. "I hope they're not taking out this cot too," he thought.

The whole gang had returned to the house. Apparently, they had finished with this particular room, for they walked through it into another. "Only these two small rooms are left," the leader was saying. "Take away the big sofa. I'll go and phone Yakub Khan."

The telephone appeared to be in the living room. It was from there that Banya heard dialling sounds. The man was speaking: "Everything cleared, Yakub Miyan. Our men have finished the job in under an hour despite the rain." After a pause he continued, "Miyan, our gang deserves some special distinctive name. Something romantic, something that sounds like a filmy thing. Golden Gang, Magnificent Seven or something like that. Any ideas? Eh? Eh?" (laughing loudly). "Yah, that's a good one, yaar. Afre com ... AFRECOM, isn't it? First letters of our fake company: Alibaba Furniture Removing Company! Sure I also know a bit of angrezi, you know. That's a bright idea of yours." The man seemed to be listening, then said, "Oh, we'll be there in an hour or so. Eh? Oh, no. There was no hitch. Everything went on smoothly. There was a fellow here – just a kid. No problem. I took care of him all right. Achcha, Salaam Alekum."

Banya heard the receiver being replaced. Then there was a loud tramping of footsteps in the room. From under the cot, Banya saw booted feet entering the hall. It was the leader. "Oh, this trunk," the man said suddenly. "How come I overlooked it?"

Banya couldn't see any trunk. "Must be upon a stool

or something," he thought.

"Some very nice clothes here," the man was saying to himself. "Nylon, terylene, silk. We can't leave this behind."

Two more men came into the room. One of them said, "That bum Janu broke a mirror, Saab."

"What?" yelled the leader. "Broke the mirror? I'll break all his bones and teach him a lesson."

Shouting curses, he left the room. Janu was in for a thrashing!

Banya saw his chance and slipped out from under the cot. He dashed to the living room and picked up the phone. There was no sound, no connection. Of course! That fellow must have cut the wires after his own call. He was certainly no fool, this man.

Banya replaced the receiver. He simply had to get away from there. But how? And where to? If he left by the front door, the scoundrels were bound to catch him before he got to his bike.

The bearded man was on his way back to the house. "That brat's bike. Did you put it on the truck?" he asked his man.

"Oh, yes. Not only one, but both," one of them said.

"Both? Whose was the other?"

"The second one must be the watchman's. Why leave it?"

Faster Fenay, all alert, was listening. After finding the telephone "dead," he had come back to the sitting room with the idea of jumping out of the window and reaching his bike. But from what he had just heard, both the bikes were loaded on the truck.

How could he possibly escape from this place without

a bike? As far as he knew, there was no house or hut in the vicinity. The rain was still pouring down. Could he run all the way to Hadapsar? It was not less than four miles. Perhaps he would meet a truck or car going either way on the highway. But in the downpour and at such a late hour, who would bother to stop and listen to a young boy's improbable tale?

Suddenly, like lightning, an idea struck him. The idea was as brilliant as it was risky. But risk was second nature to Faster Fenay. As he saw it, his getting away from this house was the most important problem. Only then, could he contact the police and nail down this nefarious gang.

There was not a moment to lose. He looked at the trunk placed on a stool. It was big enough. He opened the lid, took out some clothes, thrust them under the mattress on the cot. He got in, lay down and pulled some clothes over himself and shut the lid. He felt like Sambhaji escaping from Agra Fort along with his illustrious father!

It was touch and go! The leader of the gang was about to enter the room. "Come on, be quick. Take out this trunk!" he shouted. It was lucky for Banya that the man didn't bother to open the trunk again. The gang was in a hurry. The trunk was lifted and dropped in the truck. Banya felt as if all his bones were being rattled – if not broken. His ever-alert brain was, however, intact. His ears were pricked to register every movement, every word.

But now, all talking among the robbers had stopped. The truck's engine started phrr-phrr and the heavy vehicle was on its way.

The trunk, being the last to be loaded, was in the rear

of the truck. No other heavy article was put on top of it. All the men were jammed in the front part of the vehicle.

Some minutes passed and Faster Fenay ventured to raise the lid of the trunk slightly. He removed the tarpaulin covering a little and took a deep breath of fresh air. Sharp showers hit his face and he felt greatly refreshed. But his heart was heavy leaving Subhash helpless in the bungalow.

As the truck turned in on the highway leading back to Pune, Banya had to think of his next move. When would they come across other vehicles? How to make distress signals to the other drivers? Wouldn't the Alibaba Gang smell a rat? Would the other vehicle bother to stop? Would anyone care to help a strange lad? And what if the gang tried to make a bolt for it? Would they take the truck to some lonely place and ditch him?

The truck did pass some stray farmers legging it to the city, as also a lonely cyclist or two. But Banya decided against signalling to any of them. No single person would dare challenge a truck carrying four or five people.

Our hero began to lose courage. He was just about to withdraw his head into the trunk when his keen eyes saw a black station wagon. It had wire-meshed sides and was turning into the highway from the crossroads. It was behind the truck, not hurrying. Its driver had no reason to suspect that there was anything odd about the truck.

But in a moment, Banya's heart leapt with joy as the wagon came closer. He could now see the bright cane-like metal rod rising vertically from the driver's seat. Yes, it was an aerial and this was a mobile police van with wireless equipment fitted to it. His joy knew no bounds! It was like

a blind man praying for one eye and the good God granting him both!

Banya raised the lid and stepped out and started waving his hands vigorously.

Meanwhile, the truck driver and the other robbers too, had noticed that a police van was behind them. But it didn't seem to be chasing them; it was probably on a routine round. Even then the driver accelerated slightly. The police van continued to keep its own speed. The gang felt relieved. It was obviously no chase.

Over there, in the van, Inspector Buckley sat next to the driver's seat. The police party was returning to the city after a routine raid on an illicit liquor den. The day's job was well done and the Inspector was relaxed. He was looking ahead aimlessly through the front glass as the van sped along.

Suddenly, the Inspector raised his eyebrows. In the fast fading light, he couldn't see anything in the distance very clearly. But his eyes – could they have deceived him? He narrowed his eyes, looked again. Yes, there *was* something in the truck ahead, something at the rear. It was moving up and down, right and left. Was it a human hand? Yes, it was, and it was trying frantically to catch somebody's attention. Somebody's? Why, certainly ours, thought the Inspector.

This was frantic waving, desperate. Inspector Buckley was not an officer who would let any puzzle get the better of him. Someone was in distress!

"Driver," ordered the Inspector, "Follow that truck! No, catch up with it."

At once the police van forged ahead. In a few moments it was within four or five yards of the truck. The Inspector now had a closer look and saw that a young boy with large eyes was standing up out of a box or a trunk, obviously urging the police to rescue him.

The Inspector gave a sign and the police siren wailed a shrill warning ... The driver took the van alongside the truck. The Inspector leapt up on to the truck and the police driver accelerated to overtake. Two policemen had also jumped on to the mudguards of the lorry and climbed in.

In the truck, behind the driver's seat stood three persons. These robbers offered no resistance. The Inspector took out his revolver and ordered the driver to stop the truck.

While the policemen were packing the gang into the police van, Faster Fenay had explained things briefly to the Inspector.

"Now I see who this poor fellow must be," said the Inspector. In the police van lay an unconscious man. He was in the traditional khaki clothes of a watchman.

"This must be the bhayya of your bungalow. We found him lying in some bushes near the road. Must have been drugged by the ruffians! We'll take him to the police doctor in the city."

Faster Fenay suddenly remembered Subhash. "Let's go back to the bungalow," he suggested. "There's a whole cupboard full of all sorts of medicines. We'll find something good enough to bring both my pal and the bhayya to life."

"Agreed," said Inspector Buckley. "You certainly are a brave and smart lad! By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"It's Banesh Fenay, sir, but everybody calls me Faster Fenay," said our hero.

"Faster Fenay?" exclaimed the Inspector, "Why, there couldn't be a better name for you, my boy!"

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DON'T TELL ME THIS FAIRYTALE

INDI RANA

Illustrated by Kavita Valladares

There was once this princess, see and there was also this prince. Do I hear a ho hum? Well you may ho and hum, and why not? Yet another prince and princess story!

Now princesses are always beautiful, right? And princes are always handsome. And so these two were, too. They lived in beautiful palaces right next to each other. And their palaces were beautiful, terribly beautiful. The prince and princess wore beautiful clothes, just as princes and princesses should. Silks and satins and gold and velvet …

And they had such terribly beautiful manners. Please, and thank you, and if you will, and if I might be so bold. Salaams and gracias and aadaabs.

Do I hear you saying "Oh, how terrible, terrible, terrible?" And well you might, for these were a terrible two, all good and proper and beautiful. And as terribly beautiful princes and princesses are supposed to, these two were going to be married.

And, of course, live happily ever after.

Then there was this day when a dreadfully ugly demon, or was it a dragon, or a rakshasa came lumbering up over

the horizon. It blew yards and yards of fire and black and billowing clouds of steam out of its dreadfully ugly nostrils. Coughing and bellowing and harrumping like any old steam engine shunting in the railway yards.

The prince and princess were in the princess's garden amongst the terribly beautiful flowers and trees, playing rounders on the smooth and beautiful lawns. They were more than a little bored with the game, for they played it every day, because that was proper. That, or croquet or polo.

Anyway, it was rounders they were playing that day, dressed in their terribly beautiful clothes, when the demon or dragon or rakshasa came lumbering over the horizon belching, roaring and hiccupping fire and smoke and steam.

The demon or whatever, saw the terrible two playing rounder and coughed out a larger than usual yard of fire. The trees caught fire, the furniture and carpets and tapestries hanging inside, all looking beautiful, caught fire, and before you could say Harry Rama, everything was burnt to ashes. The princess who was standing right in the demon or whatever's path (for she knew when demons or dragons or rakshasas came they usually got off with a princess or two) found herself standing in a charred and blackened petticoat, with soot on her face, and her hair and eyebrows singed. And all her terribly beautiful clothes burnt to bits.

She had time to notice that the demon or whatever, had a bad case of bad breath, but before she could say "toothpaste" the demon or dragon or rakshasa up and grabbed ... the Prince.

It is possible that it was a she demon or dragon or rakshasa, but that was never firmly known.

"Ho hum," the princess sighed, "*What* a fairy story!"

And the demon or whatever lumbered off over the horizon with the beautiful prince in its mouth, and the prince was still handsome, because the little that wasn't burnt was the prince and his terribly beautiful clothes. Not a hair was burnt, not an eyebrow, not a stitch.

The princess looked around at the ashen remains of her palace and at the sooty black garden that used to be grass and flowers and trees. And drifting along in the warm breeze left behind by the departing demon or whatever, were some sheets of the local *Royal Times*, floating out of the garden of the palace of the prince.

The princess stuck pieces of the newspaper together, using bits of blackened twigs as staples, and made a paper bag of it. She punched holes in it for her neck and arms and carefully put it on.

Then she set off to rescue the prince. Over the horizon she went, and into the blackness of the night. It was a tiring business. But the princess was quite a determined young miss. Over horizons and into blacknesses she trudged for a week. Until she found the demon or dragon or rakshasa asleep in front of its cave.

"O demon or whatever," the princess said politely, if a little tiredly, folding her hands in a namaste, "Wake up, if you please, and excuse my bad manners, because I know you are entitled to the spoils of war, but I've come to rescue the prince."

The demon or whatever opened one eye, and shut it again. Bored, it was, you see. The story was such an old,

old one – except it was usually a prince who came, alone on a horse, and in shining armour and boots, carrying a sword and shield (if it was in Europe) or in a breastplate and sandals, carrying a bow and arrow and surrounded by monkeys (if it was in Asia.)

"Hummpf!" was all it said.

So the princess tried again. "O demon or whatever," she said as politely, "Pardon me for speaking, but I'll bet you can't burn that tree, three miles away, with a single blast of your breath." And she did a proper aadaab.

At that the demon or whatever opened both its eyes, looked a while at the princess and said, "Don't be silly." It closed its eyes again, opened its mouth and burnt to cinders a tree standing three miles away.

Then the princess said, "Thank you, O gracious demon. I am so very impressed with your prowess. But, if I may be so bold, I bet you can't flatten that mountain behind you, that's three miles high."

And the demon stood up, and with one flick of its tail flattened the mountain three miles high.

And the princess said, "Ah gracias, and salaams and syesye, O mighty demon. I am wonderstruck indeed by all you can do. If you'll pardon my terrible tongue, but I'll bet you can't go right around the world in three minutes flat."

The demon or whatever looked at her with a superior air. "HARRUMPF," it said in a lordly way, and it turned and lumbered swiftly off into the horizon.

Oh those horizons!

The princess in her newspaper bag, opened the door of the cave heaving it in with a mighty heave which she

almost didn't manage, so tired was she after all that walking and all that politeness and thinking while her eyebrows were singed, and all she wore was a newspaper bag.

The prince was sitting on a wooden crate inside, throwing a ball against the wall, still dressed in the terribly beautiful clothes, and looking as handsome as ever.

"Prince," the princess called, "It's me, and I've come to rescue you, if you will, and if I may be bold."

"Oh good," the prince said, and yawned.

Then he looked at the princess with her singed eyebrows and ragged hair, with soot streaks on her face and arms, wearing a crumpled bag made from an old copy of *The Royal Times*, with mud on her soles and between her toes, and he said, "Oh! how dirty you are, and how you do smell!" Then he said, "Well, rescue me if you must princess, but let me tell you one thing for sure: I'm not going to marry any princess who smells so foul and looks as dirty as you, and, what's more, isn't even wearing her beautiful clothes. Oh no siree, no, not I." And he went back to throwing his ball against the wall.

Did I hear a ho hum?

The princess looked at her prince for a while. And then she said, "Well, thank goodness for that!"

And when that demon or dragon or rakshasa or whatever, came lumbering over the horizon in three minutes flat, there was the princess disappearing into the sunrise, sooty and dirty and smelly as ever, clicking her heels and snapping her fingers, and dancing and prancing all by herself, and singing a happy tune.

This story was first published in *Target* in April 1987.

THE DAY I SAW THE YETI

MARGARET BHATTY

Illustrated by Tapas Guha

That was the summer I celebrated my tenth birthday at 15,000 feet in the Khumbu region. And, as a kind of bonus from Mother Nature, that was the day I saw the yeti. My father was a lecturer at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu and he took me along when he accompanied the American naturalist, Dr Bill Fleming, to take pictures and make sketches of high altitude birds for his now famous book on the birds of Nepal.

We camped on the green alp just below the snowline within view of Khujung, a yersa or summer settlement, inhabited by Sherpas and Khamba Tibetans only from June to September. They were yak herders who also cut grass on the meadows for winter fodder and raised small crops of barley and potatoes on the terraced slopes.

Khujung has only a few pucca houses of which the largest is a handsome double-storeyed building belonging to the wealthy yak breeder, Konje Chumbi. He had ridden up ahead of his clan with his two teenage daughters and a son of about my age. We had dinner with them the first night.

After a good meal the grown-ups were served cups of

chang beer while we cracked walnuts and munched dried apricots. Dr Fleming was curious to know more about the most remarkable feature of Khujung – a small monastery perched on top of a precipice a few hundred feet high, but without any evident way of getting up. How could anyone have built it up there?

"The gods built it," Konje Chumbi said with absolute seriousness as he lifted glowing embers off the fire and put them on his hookah. "That was hundreds of years ago. There are fifteen monks now, but the Head Lama himself is centuries old."

"But how do they go up and down?" I asked.

"They don't," he replied. "Once they enter the monastery they stay there forever. For pilgrims who want to make offerings to the deity there are footholds carved in the rocks with chain links embedded deep."

"But what about water and food?"

"Rain and snow collects in cisterns dug out of the rock on top, and food and fuel is drawn up by baskets let down on ropes. Pilgrims give them enough to live on during the long winter months."

"Have you ever been there?" Dr Fleming asked.

Konje Chumbi laughed. "As young boys we often laid wagers to see who could go up the fastest. There are rare treasures in the shrine. There is even the scalp, some fur and one hand of a yeti –"

"Yeti!" We all leaned forward with interest.

"A sherpa found it in the Everest region and presented it to the Head Lama. There are no yetis in this Khujung region."

The rest of the evening was spent listening to Konje Chumbi's strange tales about the Abominable Snowman – how it carried away village girls to its lair in the gorges, attacked yak herds, lifted sheep. "It is so strong it can kill a full-grown yak with one blow and rip off its legs with its bare hands."

Although we were to spend only two days at Khujung. Dr Fleming decided he must climb up to the monastery and photograph the remains of the yeti. In our tent that night he and my father talked till late and I forced myself to stay awake to hear it all. Outside, wrapped into his blanket of yak felt, Temba snored loudly before our campfire. He was a shingo naua, or forest guard, provided by the headman of the last permanent village below the treeline in the valley to act as guide and help us with three ponies and a pack mule. Temba had accompanied countless sahibs trekking in the Everest region and knew some English. He boasted he'd seen many yetis. "Like short men they are," he said, "But with the strength of rakshasas, and all covered with hair."

"It's odd how stories persist," Papa remarked, settling into his sleeping bag next to me, "and yet no one has ever captured a yeti or taken a picture of one."

Dr Fleming turned the wick of the hurricane lamp low before lying down. "The earliest mention was by a Westerner back in 1832 – a man named Hodgson. Since then forty others have sighted it briefly, or seen its footprints."

"Actually footprints are the only photographic evidence we really have, aren't they?" Papa said. "I remember the remarkable photographs taken a few years ago by Eric Shipton's British expedition to Everest. The shape of the

foot and toes suggest an ape. What would the ancestral line of the yeti be among fossil ape forms?"

"Undoubtedly, the *Gigantopithecus*," Dr Fleming said promptly. "It must have looked very much like the yeti that is described by the sherpas. And then, fossil remains of the *Gigantopithecus* have been found at sites close to where live yetis have been sighted."

The following morning, my birthday, I woke up to find my very first camera on my pillow – a simple box which I still have despite the more sophisticate ones I now use for my craft as a wildlife photographer. We cut the cake my mother had specially packed with our stores. With half a dozen rolls of film in my haversack, I was ready to start for the monastery.

To my disappointment, Temba convinced my father I shouldn't try the climb. It was too dangerous for anyone without experience. Also, females were unwelcome there, he explained. It seemed that female devotees often got hysterics halfway up, too terrified to go on or come down. So many had fallen to their deaths that the monks had declared their mountain inauspicious for women.

I spent my morning around our camp, snapping clusters of alpine flowers and the snowpeaks rising as high as 25,000 feet. Perhaps I had a more profitable time than the grown-ups did. They came back tired and disappointed. The climb was very dangerous, they said. But the monastery was dingy, dirty and tumbledown, clearly not built by the gods. The Head Lama was not centuries old and the yeti was not a yeti at all, but the remains of a Himalayan bear. The hand

mentioned by Konje Chumbi was now a small heap of knuckle bones with the rest used up for grinding into magic potions and elixirs.

Determined not to waste any more time, Dr Fleming and Papa took their cameras, sketchpads and other gear and we climbed the grassy slope to where a pair of snow choughs were busy digging for grubs and crickets. They were friendly creatures and quite used to humans. In a trigger-happy mood, I took a number of pictures of them.

Suddenly, we heard voices raised in excitement and looking down, saw three shaggy Khamba herdsmen talking with Temba and waving their arms.

"What's going on?" Dr Fleming asked. Temba now came racing up the slope, as excited as the herdsmen. "Yeti!" he cried. "They say they saw yeti footprints on the glacier below the monastery. Very clear! They say they will take the sahibs to see them."

"Who are they, do you know? " my father asked.

"Oh, yes! They work for Konje Chumbi. They say he sent them to call you –"

So, for the second time that day, the two rushed off on a wild goose chase, and, for the second time, I was left behind because I was too young and too inexperienced to cross the glacier.

Temba and I carried all the gear back to the tent. He then took his axe and went off to chop some green juniper for his night fire. I wandered at will on the meadow, trying to capture some close-ups of a rare and lovely Krishna Peacock as it flew about with other butterflies in a patch of wild iris.

Before long I had wandered quite far from camp, pursuing a particularly fine specimen, four inches in wing span. Creeping almost on all fours, I finally found it resting on grass blades covering a rock. So intent was I that I didn't see the yeti until it was half-way up the small gorge on the other side. Its movement caught my eye. Looking down, I froze in horror.

It was very dark brown, heavily haired especially on its hunched shoulders. I clearly recall the white patches on its chest, which means that it must've been climbing upright, like a human. It had long arms reaching below its knees and the crown of its head was strangely pointed.

Perhaps some instinct warned it because it stopped suddenly and looked up. Its face was hairless, somewhat flat and with a heavy jaw. Catching sight of me it froze too, baring large teeth. Then, turning swiftly, it began going down the ravine, half-galloping on all fours, half-running upright. I got a picture of it in full retreat.

"Temba! Temba!" I shouted, dreadfully scared by now. The sherpa appeared from the opposite direction, dragging a bundle of juniper branches.

"Yeti! I saw a yeti!" I cried excitedly. He grinned and shook his head, refusing to believe me.

"Yeti! I saw a yeti!" I said, as soon as Papa and Dr Fleming appeared late in the evening. Even they refused to believe me.

In fact, Papa collapsed on the grass near our tent and groaned. "You too?" he accused.

"What d'you mean You too?" I demanded, and went on to describe the creature I'd seen. But I stopped when I

saw neither of them was listening. They were both in a foul mood. "What happened?" I asked.

They had been made to look silly. Word had spread among the herders that the two sahibs were very keen on seeing a yeti. A few of them had decided they would earn a little baksheesh by producing some yeti footprints. These were stamped out into softer snow higher up the glacier, a good two-hour climb. Dr Fleming was naturally very angry. But the ruffians turned nasty and demanded they be paid for the trouble they had taken. It turned out then that Konje Chumbi hadn't sent them after all. Matters would have taken an ugly turn had not one young lad rushed down to Khujung and fetched the wealthy yak breeder. He threatened to horsewhip the herders and dismiss them. Clearly both Dr Fleming and Papa had had enough of yetis – for that one day at least. My story would have to wait.

"But I got a picture of it ..." I said.

"A bear – it must have been a bear," Papa said.

I couldn't sleep that night. I'd got a picture of a yeti! The first and only one ever! When I became world famous the grown-ups would have to believe me.

Back in Kathmandu, Dr Fleming personally processed all the film we'd exposed, including three of my own rolls. But when I saw the results I realized I still had much to learn as a photographer.

"A bear!" Papa said, examining my historic picture. "A very big black bear!"

I have all those first studies of alpine flowers, choughs and snow-peaks in an albums. Under one, the caption reads "The Yeti of Khujung".

"But where's the yeti?" people ask.

"Do you see those boulders tumbled on the slope in the right-hand corner? It's slightly to their left ..."

"You mean this big black smudge here?"

"No ... that's my thumb actually. I was so scared that my hands were trembling. To steady the camera I clutched it hard. My thumb came over half the shutter, but the yeti is there."

"Tell us about it," they ask. And so I do. If nothing else, it makes a good story.

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TRAPPED

SIGRUN SRIVASTAVA

Illustrated by Suddhasattwa Basu

The bear padded down the village path. He stopped to sniff the air. The village lay drowsing in the hot, afternoon sun. Nothing moved except the leaves of the neem tree. The bear walked on. He was a young bear, small and chubby. Blades of grass were knotted in his soft, shining, black fur. His small black eyes sparkled with innocent curiosity. Reaching an open gate, the bear peeped into the courtyard. He watched an old woman squatting on a cot near the kitchen. A girl sat near her, scrubbing a brass dish with ash and sand. The sparkling reflection of the sun on the shining metal caught the bear's eyes. He growled softly. The girl looked up. The dish dropped from her hands. The bear watched it roll to a halt near the door. The girl shrieked and pointed a finger at the bear. The bear stared at her. The hysterical shrieks puzzled and frightened him. But what really scared him were the sharp yelps that suddenly erupted all around him. Dogs! He instinctively knew he had to stay away from them. Suddenly, he could smell danger all around him.

The young bear turned hastily and stepped back. He headed quickly for the road leading through the fields into

the forest. Too late! The village, abruptly shaken to life from its usual afternoon snooze, suddenly buzzed with hectic activity. The hunting cries of boys and beasts rang in the air. Doors banged shut, windows were barricaded. Faces appeared over walls, rooftops and trees. Swinging his heavy head from side to side the bear pushed forward. He hopped over open drains and a garbage dump. On and on he ran, pressing away from the cries, away from the barks. But the barks drew closer and so did the cries. Through the cloud of dust he saw them coming towards him, a herd of children, barefoot, with raised sticks in their fists. And close on their heels, pushing impatiently past naked legs were the dogs.

"Get him!" A fresh uproar echoed through the lanes. "Get him. Get him. Get him."

The bear didn't understand the cries, but the wild barks of the dogs terrified him. He turned and ran blindly into the next lane and into another and one more, away, away from the dogs, the screams, the tapping of naked feet, that seemed to come from all directions, cornering him, blocking his way. The bear skidded to a halt, and rose on to his hind legs. An angry growl rasped inside his throat, escalated into a dangerous snarl. Fear flickered in his eyes. His nostrils flared. He searched the place for a way open for him, a blind lane, widening to a walled-in square with an old, dried up well in the middle. The bear reached the well with a few awkward jumps, stared up and searched the walls around him for a hiding place. But there was none! The bear was trapped! Trapped! He turned and faced the children, pounding down the road, the snarling dogs preceding them by a couple of yards.

The first stone hit on the shoulder. A brick followed, then a rotten pumpkin. And then the dogs were on him, digging their teeth into the soft flesh of his legs, others were jumping for his throat. The bear sent them sprawling into the dust with a single blow of this paw. But they were back on their legs in a second. And there were more. And above the wild and crazy barking of the dogs rose the tumultous uproar of the children.

The bear cringed. Then he swung around and with one mighty leap, jumped into the deep darkness of the well. His head grazed against the sharp and protruding stones, his shoulders brushed the rough surface of the wall, then he hit the bottom with a mighty thud. For a moment he sat benumbed, searching the darkness around him. Slowly, he raised his head and stared up into the round patch of bright sky above him, ringed with the dark silhouettes of faces. The children were rejoicing, their jubilant cries ringing like thunder in the hollow of the shaft. More and more of them bent over the rim, blocking out the bear's last rays of light.

The bear let our a terrifying snarl, both terrifying and terrified. He drew further back against the wall, away from the stones coming raining down on him. The bear clawed at them, snarling and roaring, infuriated. Pawing the air blindly, he pressed his back against the wall for shelter and protection as the hail of dust, stones and bricks continued mercilessly.

Gradually, the cries and the mocking laughter stopped. One by one the menacing faces disappeared. Just one remained, the face of a girl, bending over the well, her long plaits dangling from the sides of her head.

The bear looked up at her, exposing his sharp teeth and growling aggressively. He stared up into the dark outline of her face and listened to the kind and gentle sound of her voice. He didn't understand what she was saying. But there was something in her voice that comforted him. His dreadful snarl ebbed away, turned into muffled grumbles and then died.

"That's better," the girl said. "Now sit down and wait. I'll get you out of here."

Then she turned around, setting her long skirt swinging. "What is wrong with you?" she asked the children around her. "Why do you torture this animal? It has done you no harm. You should be ashamed of yourselves. Get out of here, fast! And take the dogs with you. Keep them behind doors. And you stay off the road, do you hear! All of you."

"Come on, Meera didi," cried a boy. "It was just a joke!"

"If this is a joke, I don't think it is funny. Chasing a young bear into a well. He could have broken his neck. Now get the dogs out of here. Laxman, let me think ... how can I help the bear out of the well?"

"Try a rope," a little boy cried excitedly. "He might climb up."

A snigger behind flat hands was the answer.

"Climb up! Climb up! We aren't in a circus."

"Wait!" Meera interrupted the uproar of laughter. "Wait. I have an idea! Get a ladder. Who can get me a ladder?"

"I can," cried the little boy, nervously hitching up his pants. "I can get a ladder."

"Excellent, Ramu! You are very clever! Come on, Laxman," Meera turned to her brother, "Go and help him! And as for the rest of you," her voice turned hard and commanding, "Stay off the streets. Give that poor animal a chance!"

Mumbling under their breath, throwing disapproving glances at Meera, the children went home, pulling the dogs with them. Silence once more descended on the village, broken only by the sound of running footsteps.

"We got it, we got it!" cried Laxman, bringing the ladder.

"Wonderful!" Meera smiled at the young boy. "Come help me get it into the well. Careful! We must not frighten the little fellow."

Meera looked into the well and began to speak to the bear trapped at the bottom of the well. Her voice was gentle and reassuring.

Slowly they lowered the bamboo ladder into the shaft, carefully avoiding the bear, who had risen to his legs. A growl rumbled inside his throat. He backed away. As the ladder advanced towards him he began to prod and claw at it wildly.

"No, no," said Meera softly, "It will not hurt you. It is a ladder. Just a ladder, move, make room."

The bear stepped back, grumbling softly, eyeing the long object with suspicion, as it was rammed into the soft gravel of the well. He pawed it curiously, sniffed at it. Then he tried the first step, tried the next and one more, took the next six in a hurried climb that almost brought him to the

middle of the well. There he stopped and raised his head, looked at Meera, with round, black eyes, innocent and trusting.

"Come up," she said gently. "Nobody is going to hurt you. Believe me."

And then she stepped back, moved away from the well, stood in the shade of the wall shielding Ramu and Laxman with her body.

She waited ... and watched, her heart pounding inside her throat. There ... the head of the bear appeared from inside the well, then his shoulders. He sniffed, took in the place, them climbed on to the rim and leapt to the ground. Once more he searched the deserted square and looked at Meera.

Meera's heart sank. She didn't move. "Come on," she said softly, almost silently. "Come on. Go home. Run home."

The bear rose to his legs and bowed. Yes, he did! Little Ramu and Laxman swear to it. He bowed to Meera, then turned and padded off quickly down the long quiet lane that led to the main road that ran through the large green fields back into the forest.

This story was first published in *Target* in June 1989.

NINI OF THE NIGHT

KISHORE CHATTERJEE

Illustrated by Sujata Singh

In a deep, dark, forest far away from it all, lived an owl called Nono. His home was the hollow of a giant tree. And the tree was right in the centre of the forest. If you want to know how dark was this hole, just close your eyes, then press your eyelids hard against your eyes. That's it – if you see bits and blobs of light, take it from me, even that did not come through into the hole. It was dark as night where stars never shine. One thing did shine there right in the centre of the hole. They were two round circles of light, the eyes of Nono, the owl of the deep dark forest.

How did Nono get that name? Why did he always sit in that hole staring? And why, as the moon glided its silver body through the river of night, did Nono sing:

No too whitty whitty
Whitty too Nono
No too whoo whoo
No too whoo Nono
No whit Nono
No too Nono

He would continue singing till his huge round eyes fell into a sleep mumbling "No too whit, woo too no."

And how do I know all this? Because I hold in my hand *The Book of Howls* which I picked up long after all the trees had gone, all the birds had flown. *The Book of Howls* was written in a language only owls understand. It was written in fact by an old Owlshee, Nono's grandmother, long before there were many owls in the world. It's too-whitty for human words. Just decoding it has driven me to my wit's end.

The Book of Howls says that Nono was not the only owl in that hole in the big tree. Though he was the last to be born, the youngest and the loveliest, the darling of the owlings in owldom, Nono cried all day long, all night strong. *The Book of Howls* is smudgy with his tears. Nono had a grandma, the wise Owlshee, who told Nono one day when he was a tiny ball of feathers, that flying through the night there will come a beautiful owl to keep Nono company. Nono grew up with the dream. And he sat in that hole waiting for the beautiful dream. Unfortunately, the only things that did come were creamy insects, saucy grasshoppers, munchies and lollipops like lizards and mice. And they all fell down into a darker hole than the forest or the tree could provide, the hole inside Nono's tummy tum.

With his tummy full Nono would sing:

No two
Two no
No one come
Nono

Two whit
Too whoo
No one, come to
Nono.

And so he would continue too-whitting till he mentally fell asleep keeping, of course, one eye always open in case the beautiful owl that grandma talked about turned up.

The Book of Howls, pages light as feather, tell the story of Nono's birth. That day there was a lot of light in the forest. Streams of light. Bright green were the leaves, a pale and shimmering wet, glossy green and trees stood brown and erect, dancing lightly in the breeze. For days Nono's mother had sat on the egg proudly surveying the forest of light, for an owl was coming to owldom after a long, long time. The moment the egg broke, the little owl looked so round and cuddly that the whole forest of owls rushed towards the baby thinking it to be a new kind of fruit and not a bird, and they were well eager to gobble it up. Then the mother owl seeing the hungry eyes around her cried, "Nono, nono – it's my baby!" and the words echoed through the forest; owls passed it to owlings and owlings to owlets till all owldom cried together "Nono – it is the baby." And that's how the baby owl got its name.

Nono the owl grew feathers that were soft and mossy and eyes that were round and glossy. And a stomach that spread terror in the world of insects, chilled to thin ice the bones of all the mice and moles, and made cockroaches shiver with approaching danger.

It was Nono's grandmother, the literary Owlshee, who

taught her grandson how to catch mice and chew them up nicely and how to lure lizards into a deadlock. The same grandma added a touch of old wise tale around Nono's name. Looking squarely into the round eyes of her grandson she said, "Rightly you are named Nono. The two 'O' vowels are the two round circles of your eyes and the consonants stick out like the end feathers on your head." So saying she would say, "I am too whitty for words," and chuckle through the night.

The days passed into nights and the nights into yet other days. Nono grew bigger, his beak longer, his eyes rounder than all the other owls. Time passed and rounder became his eyes, wiser and wiser, the ideas in his head. But still no beautiful owl came flying through the night, as grandmother had promised, to sit beside him in the hollow of the tree. But Nono believed grandma Owlshee.

One night she had taken him for a chat to the Owlet's Rest. The Owlet's Rest was a place in the centre of the dark forest where owls could rest, and exchange wisecracks and wisdom.

That night, while the forest slept and owls flew thither and some went hither and others were in a dither for not having anywhere to go, Grandma Owl took little Nono into the Owlet's Rest. It was the one place in the forest where there was always light. The round open field of tall grass with a log in the centre was surrounded by tall trees. Like guardians they stood listening to the secret conversation. The sky was another vast, silent witness and the stars, when they came on, listened all ears. On such a night as this, did

grandma fly slowly through the forest with little Nono and together they sat on the log. The stars were restless and the sky was ablaze with curiosity. What secrets would this old Owlshee, who had written *The Book of Howls*, tell the new little owl?

Grandma Owl stretched her wings. She took off her glasses, polished them and then put them on again. Still no words of wisdom emerged. Little Nono, in the meanwhile, feeling hungry as usual, ate a gnat, this and that, polished off a dragonfly, collared a grasshopper, and devoured an assorted collection of insects. When he was feeling the pangs of these appetizers, at last the old Owlshee, opened one of her eyes and said in a voice that sounded as if it was coming from inside a deep tube well.

Beware of ...

At this point *The Book of Howls* is so vague that I was driven to my wit's end, which is not too far, to decipher of what Nono had to beware. Alas, I finally went off my head. And with it went Grandma's message. But one thing the book clearly states, Grandma and Nono sat on the log through the night, beating their wings and rolling their eyes while the trees swayed their long thin fingers and the stars looked on lazily.

All this and more I read in *The Book of Howls*, long after the forest had gone, and the owls had flown away. Only the book remained on the ground for me to pick up. In it I read about the icy mice whom Nono swallowed many times but whose spirits returned again and again to give

Nono insomnia. An Owl with insomnia? Yes indeed! Night would extend into day and day would go backward into night, but nothing much happened to Nono. He just continued to sit and stare.

Then came the big day. The day when Nono met Nini and it is described with grace in *The Book of Howls.*

One dusky twilight, Nono, tired of sitting in his hole waiting for the friend of his dreams, flew out. He moved from tree to tree, hooting his heart out. His silver wings cast long, slender shadows on the grass. Suddenly, a sight struck Nono, like a scrumptious dragonfly. What was that flying high on top of that tall tree that had all those silver shiny leaves? By all the wisdom in his head – if it wasn't the most beautiful bird he had ever seen? A dazzling blue were its feathers, soft and inviting like a sky turned into a vast cushion. The eyes were round and yellow like the colour of sunflowers which normally Nono would have never known, but since he was an owl who suffered from insomnia, his nights moved into days and he knew sunflowers and they always gave him a headache. By the light of the silvery moon, the yellow in the eye of this glorious bird was not over bright and glittering but was like summer light filtered through khus khus. Nono thought it was the most extraordinary owl in the whole owldom. Closer and closer Nono flew towards this dream come true. The circle round its eyes had three colours on the feathers. A russet, a pale ashy grey and yellow. These merged into the silver of the breast feathers and finally the blue tufts above the legs. What a splendid owl, thought Nono. Old grandmother Owlshee really knew what she

was talking about. He glided his wings through the grey night towards this incandescent owl.

This was the moment for which he had waited all through those nights in the hollow. This was Nini, for whom he had cried, "Too whoo too whoo." She is the Nini of the Night, the grandest, the most stunning night bird there ever was and will be. He hovered round her under the tall trees.

And the Nini of the Night moved its wings to the music of the breeze as if it was saying "Too woo true true" to all Nono's thoughts. Round and round Nini went Nono crying:

Too whit too whoo
This is two, I want to knoo

He was happy, deliciously happy. And the owl with the yellow eyes moved its wings rhythmically like a dancer of the trees ...

We must leave Nono now for a moment and follow the flight of another owl as she leaves the dark hollow of a tree and moves through the midnight forest. She wears glasses, yes, thick and round, and the feathers on her body are faded like the colours of an old wall. It is the old Owlshee, Nono's grandmother. What is that she is carrying under her wings? The great *Book of Howls*, the book containing all the wisdom of owldom and written long, long ago. For she had heard the calls of the strange creatures with two legs. They were all over the forest and old Owlshee knew it was time to bury the book of wisdom and fly – where? She did not

know. She did not care. Wherever the tired wings carried her. Each to his own. So it was written in *The Book of Howls*...

Nono and Nini danced, to the music of the leaves through those tall dark trees. Suddenly Nono sang:

I must go back to the hollow
For the morrow is another day
Too whit too whoo
I go with you.

Nono will not go back alone. After all these years of too whitting and too whooing, the beautiful new owl, the bird of all his dreams, the Nini of the Night would go back with him.

The noise came suddenly. Just when Nono had almost touched Nini with his wings. With the noise the thread that had attached the beautiful blue and yellow owl to the tree snapped. It was now a mass of stuffed feathers and straw moving in the wind. Only a piece of rag remained where once those glorious wings danced to Nono's call. And the string moved like a line of fate in the wind as if all the world was pulling at it.

As for Nono, he saw the trap in the nick of time. A string snapped of memories. He remembered his grandmother's warning and her words of wisdom. "Beware, beware!" Had she not said, "Beware of the Nini of the Night?"

With one "too-whoo" of anguish and pain Nono swung out of the trap the two legged creatures had set and flew back through the sad night to his hollow, where he sits still,

a bitterly disappointed and disillusioned owl, staring with a pair of burning, shining eyes at the dark night, waiting for the owl of all his dreams to come and sit by his side. If you don't believe me, read *The Book of Howls*.

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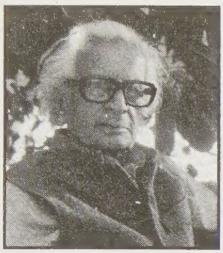
Biographical Notes



B R Bhagwat was born in 1910 into a reformist family. An active freedom fighter, he joined the underground movement, was arrested in 1943 and imprisoned for twenty two months. He has been editor of the children's magazines *Khelgadi* and *Balmitra.* The much-loved Faster Fenay, a boy who solved mysteries with brawn and brain, as well as Bipin Bukalwar, are his creations. He has two hundred books to his credit besides translations of twenty books by Jules Verne and many other novels. He is the recipient of several awards including a Lifetime Achievement in Children's Literature by the USA based Maharashtra Foundation.
D R Bhagwat, brother of B R Bhagwat and the translator of "Faster Fenay Moves Out," was a journalist and had translated many of his brother's stories from Marathi to English.

Kishore Chatterjee has been a regular contributor to *Target.* His literary career began after Rosalind Wilson took a keen interest in his work. Besides a number of stories for children, he has also written four books of fantasy for children in Bangla. One of them, *Pulu in Pianoland,* which he himself has translated into English, has been selected by National Book Trust for publication.

Margaret Bhatty was born in Kumaon and educated in Nainital. She graduated from Lucknow, where she taught creative writing courses in the College for Literature for Neo-literates. She writes stories and novels for young readers as well as for adults. In 1982 she won the BBC World Service's International Short

Story Competition. In 1995 she won the BBC Award in a Radio Play Contest for the best entry from south-east Asia.

Mukta Munjal was born in Ludhiana and went to Tara Hall, Shimla, at an early age. While at school, she became interested in reading, writing and music. She was able to turn her love of books and music into a profession by contributing reviews and stories for different publications while at Lady Shriram College, New Delhi, from where she received her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English. She has since continued to be a freelance journalist offering her creative contributions in the areas of travel writing, book reviews and fiction for children. She recently graduated from the London School of Journalism and has since begun her current work on a full length fiction novel set in north India.

Sigrun Srivastava is a sculptor by profession. She has published over thirty picture books and children's story books. She has scripted for theatre, television and films, been a member of the Children's Film Society and is the founder member of the Forum of Authors for Children, Teachers and Schools.

Swapna Dutta, currently one of the editors with the *Limca Book of Records*, has been writing for children for the last two decades in English, Hindi and Bangla in several newspapers and magazines including *Target*. She has published over thirty books including translations from regional languages, short stories, one-act plays and picture books.

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